

# NEW WORLDS

PROFILES

## John Rackham

London



Second contributor in our new series of Guest Editorials by prominent science fiction authors, John Rackham raises some interesting points this month—and incidentally takes a tilt at some of Kingsley Amis's diagnoses in his book *New Maps of Hell*. These factors will be brought still further into the light in successive Editorials as many of our authors disagree with Mr. Amis's contentions regarding modern science fiction. Sometime later Mr. Amis will contribute one or two Editorials himself and the series looks like producing some lively discussions—not only between the authors, in print, but for all those readers who like to think for themselves and write in their opinions for publication in the "Postmortem" section.

John Rackham has been in the background of the London s-f scene for many years now. Unobtrusive at Conventions, his presence has been forcibly felt by the pithy discussions he has triggered off when the professionals have been either on the rostrum or in private session. During the past two years his writing ability has increased tremendously, along with his output, and we can expect to see many more fine stories coming from his typewriter in the near future.



# NEW WORLDS SCIENCE FICTION

No. 112  
VOLUME 38

2/6

RUPERT CLINTON

*The Golden Age  
Part One*

J. G. BALLARD

PHILIP E. HIGH

GEORGE WHITLEY

LEE HARDING

*Guest Editorial*  
JOHN RACKHAM

*Cover Painting*  
GERARD QUINN



*A Nova Publication*



16th Year  
of Publication





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MONTHLY

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Editor : JOHN CARNELL

Cover painting by QUINN entitled "The Violinist"

## TWO SHILLINGS AND SIXPENCE

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Guest Editorial

*This is the second in this new series by prominent science fiction writers. This month John Rackham takes a tilt at the protagonists in the "science fiction has a message" controversy.*

## On A New Level

by JOHN RACKHAM

---

In my experience, the best way to lead up to a controversy is to begin from a region of agreement. As any discussion of science-fiction seems to invite controversy, these days, I'd like to establish one basic agreement, which is that science-fiction is, primarily, for entertainment. It's a trite point, but one worth making, as it is so often lost sight of, once the argument starts. This is fiction, first and foremost, to be read and enjoyed as such. It may carry the most inspiring and world-shaking message ever, but if the editor doesn't enjoy, and the reader read, then it's just so much waste.

And this, appropriately enough, makes the whole question of 'message' an important thing, on which there is a sharp difference of opinion. There are those who emphatically reject 'messages' of any kind, who pine for the good old days when S-F was wide and sweeping space-opera, with plenty of thrilling action and adventure, planet-busting heroes, BEM's and beautiful females in distress. They claim that S-F has been on the downgrade ever since it started to 'take itself seriously.' Along with Sam Goldwyn, they cry 'Messages are for Western Union . . . just give us a rattling good story !'



If we let Kingsley Amis speak for the opposition, and there are many who share his stand, in 'New Maps of Hell' he makes it quite clear that he regards 'social satire' as the true field of S-F. On this basis, he elects Fred Pohl as his favourite writer. On this same basis, while claiming to be an addict of long standing, he criticises S-F severely for neglecting many of the major aspects of current social conflict. Now, in case you're thinking that I am about to suggest a happy compromise somewhere in the middle, let me disabuse you. I am in the much happier position (for the purposes of this writing, that is) of disagreeing completely with both viewpoints. Not only do I think that they are both wrong, I suggest that it is this very wrong-headedness which is blinding both camps to the first hopeful signs that S-F may be in for a major upswing in prestige and popularity.

Let's take the 'anti-messagers' first. I think they are quite wrong, inasmuch as I would say that it is well-nigh impossible to write a good story, of any kind, in or out of S-F, without conveying a 'message' of some sort. There must be an ethic, a set of social values, in any story, if it is to make sense to the reader. This may be quite naive, on the level of 'Crime doesn't pay' or 'Virtue triumphs, and the villain gets his deserts, in the end,' and the story, as such, may have nothing new to say about such conventions—but they are there, nevertheless. It is only when the writer decides to take another look at one or more of these conventions, to question their validity, that the reader begins to feel uncomfortable, and to suspect that he is being encouraged to think.

It is at about this point that the critics begin to raise their voices, or wield their caustic pens in the book columns of the daily press and weekly journals. 'S-F is getting too big for its britches, is taking itself seriously' they cry. So far as I have been able to make it out, their argument runs that S-F is fantasy, other-worldly, escapism, etc, and has no business trying to deal with 'real' problems. By some strange elastic standard, the same critics bestow the accolade on 'mainstream' writers for their tilting at the very same windmills. But, of course, the one is Literature, with the capital 'L,' while the other is just fairy-tales in modern dress. But, come to think of it, even fairy-tales, the better ones, have their own message



*All civilisations appear to attain a Golden Age at some time in their development—either before or after technological maturity. Rathvane's was threatened by two alarming factors—the discovery of artifacts over two million years old, and invasion by an advanced scientific race.*

# THE GOLDEN AGE

by RUPERT CLINTON

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## Part one

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### o n e

The mysterious globe sat on the table in the Expedition's laboratory tent and posed its enigma. The four men who stood looking at it talked heatedly among themselves.

"I don't believe it," Torrence said firmly. His famous shock of red hair gave his pugnacious face the look of an enraged rooster. "This is another of Larrabee's little jokes."

The other two men chuckled and glanced at Larrabee.

For a moment Larrabee let the question hang. Outside the steam shovels grunted and puffed, tearing ribbons of compacted rock away from the sides of the growing excavations. Men wearing brightly coloured shorts and leather sandals swarmed everywhere. The middle of the Demming Desert might not be the best place to conduct an archaeological dig, Larrabee decided ; but it was decidedly better than the dig of three seasons ago—the antarctic was cold and like all men Larrabee disliked cold intensely.

At last they were penetrating below the cap of rock that had sealed what lay beneath and this amazing globe had been one of the earliest finds. Among the layers of flint tools, the



heartbreakingly scattered scraps of pottery, the occasional fossil bone, the peculiar artifacts constructed from a material science had not yet assigned any firm place in the natural order of created things, this globe stood out as a prime example of the glory and wonder of probing into the depths of the past.

"We all remember that stunt you pulled in the antarctic," Torrence said reprovingly. "Coming out of a trench in all gravity with a steam governor and telling us you'd found it in the twenty thousand year level. A steam governor surrounded by flint arrowheads yet! Your reputation hasn't quite recovered yet, you know, Larrabee."

Custance smiled across at Larrabee. "I don't believe anything can now harm Larrabee's reputation, Torrence—"

"Thanks for those kind words, Custance." Larrabee brought his attention back into the laboratory tent. "I'm aware that I have the reputation of a joker. But I assure you this globe was found exactly as you see it now. I asked you to come here at once. You have only to check with the excavation crew who found it."

"You could have previously planted it!" Torrence said. Even he was impressed by Larrabee's gravity. "It overturns everything we believe!"

"Maybe that isn't a bad thing to happen from time to time," put in Mulvers, the biologist. He was small and dark and cheerful and bounced along as though on springs. He and Custance, the geologist, were a team. "We've left the Dark Ages behind now, you know, Torrence. This is 1562 A.S. Don't you forget it."

"I'm not likely to." Torrence walked steadily to the wall shelf and brought back the globe stowed there. "This is the Earth as we know it." He pushed the two globes together. The familiar sphere showing the seas and continents had been bought by Larrabee from a tenth level shop in Old Rathvane. Like any other educated man of the Steam Age he was familiar with the world's geography. Torrence was speaking now with a heavy sarcasm that jarred on Larrabee.

"Here we have the twelve continents with their dividing seas, the polar caps a neat and respectable size, the equatorial belt and the strips of temporal habitation either side—all neatly arranged and looking as a world should look. Just seeing the globe mapped like that gives you a warming and comforting sensation. But, this other—this—this monstrosity"



Larrabee smiled charmingly. Torrence was a bit of a windbag; but he was a brilliant scientist and his work on this dig was proving invaluable. Sometimes, as leader, Larrabee could wish his problems on to other shoulders. And sometimes, too, he guessed that Torrence shared that opinion, and with it the allied opinion that he, Torrence, should have been nominated leader.

Mulvers jiggled about, peering at the globe from the depths of the earth. "I agree that it is a monstrosity," he said. "When I first saw it and realised it was intended as a representation of a planet, I thought it showed a planet entirely covered with water." He stood back about five feet from the globe and put his hands on his hips. "Here," he said, as though proving a tough scientific concept true. "Look at it from here. Almost all blue water. Just the hint of a coloured bit of land around the north east and the edge of a largeish island in the southwest. All the rest is water."

Larrabee turned the globe bodily. "There was a mass of corrosion in a strip," he said easily. "Probably the mounting quadrant." He moved the globe very gently. "Now look at it, Mulvers."

"I know." Mulvers shook his head in wonder. "Still a lot of sea; but a lot of land, too. And all pear-shaped. D'you notice that?"

"A damn funny planet with all its land one side and all its water the other," said Custance in his short way.

"A nonsensical world!" Torrence clearly had had his scientific nose severely dislocated by this. "At what level did you say it was found, Larrabee?"

"I didn't. We'd gone right through the rock cap at that point and were cutting a section trench. Sedimentary material. The varves give us a rough check of time and Fay is counting them now. But—"

"Surely you had some idea, Larrabee?" Torrence hunted around for his big floppy hat and clapped it on his flaming hair. "I see I shall have to make an on-the-spot check myself—"

"Certainly, if you wish, Torrence. I did that. I spanned down the cutting side—I suppose you know," he couldn't help interjecting, "that some sedimentary deposits are fifty miles thick?—well, I didn't have time to check the varying thickness of the varves due to the eleven year sunspot cycle; but I did—"



Custance, uncharacteristically, interrupted. "You don't mean to say you could count down the precession of the equinoxes?"

Larrabee nodded solemnly. "Yes."

"But—but, man, they're at twenty-one thousand year intervals!" Custance stood, appalled. "How many?"

Everyone turned to stare at Larrabee. He was aware of their glances, friendly, interested, hostile . . . Who'd be a leader?

"I counted a hundred, near enough. It was, I assure you, a very quick count—"

But Custance had run madly out the tent, without his hat, and Torrence, shouting, had followed.

Mulvers was left. He was still standing off where he had been, studying the two globes. His eyes were merry; but his face was solemn, as he said: "Y'know, Larry, if this is another hoax, old Torrence will be laughing."

"I know. I thought of that at once." Larrabee pushed the familiar globe of the Earth with a finger and it rotated smoothly. "As soon as the excavation team called me and Fay and I brought it out, I thought of that. He might even have planted it himself."

"The Council of State don't care for Torrence all that much. But you nearly were pensioned off about that steam governor." Mulvers stared at his chief earnestly. "No joke, Larry?"

"No joke, Mull."

"Well—I don't know what to make of it. That's as deep as we've ever penetrated and found artifacts in situ. If your rough check was correct that makes it over two million years ago. Two million years!"

"We know there were civilisations in this world before us." Larrabee spoke vehemently, some of the fire he always felt about this subject breaking through his annoyed thoughts over Torrence and his intrigues. "Look at those things we find made of that stuff—well, no one knows what it is. It has a soapy feel and is brightly coloured, even after all the years it has lain in the ground. Yet some is hard and brittle and shattered like pottery. Some melts at a gas flame. Some is as hard as steel. We cannot duplicate that material. It runs into different shapes—some of it—under heat. Our scientists, for lack of a better name, call it 'plastic.' Plastic. I ask you; a tough material given a name meaning manipulative—"



"Take it easy, Larry—"

"And this damn globe is made of plastic, too. Look at it!" Larrabee did not touch it; but his pointing finger held rigidly on it like the mouth of an outlawed steam cannon. "Brightly coloured, covered with black print that must be the names of various parts of the world. Y'know, Mull, I wouldn't be surprised if this find doesn't overturn everything. Maybe our ideas of geology need shaking up. Maybe the Earth hasn't always been as it is today after it cooled down. Maybe it looked differently, two million years ago—"

A fresh voice cut across that, a young, lilting, laughing voice. "Two million, Larry? A measly two million? Nearer two hundred million, I'd say."

They both turned. "Fay!" Larrabee said sharply. "You counted?"

She laughed. "I left Torrence and Custance running like demented men. They won't believe until they've counted every single varve themselves." She took off her wide white hat and sat down with a little sigh. "Whew, it's hot out there! No, Larry, I didn't count them all."

"But two hundred million years . . ."

"A pity the work-people had done so much before we arrived. Harker, the section chief, had had a slight touch of the sun and had reported to the medical tent. He's a pneumo-tube operator and likely to rise high as an archaeologist." Fay hooked a canvas chair up with her foot and sat down. "It's going to be difficult to disprove the globe as an intrusion. You realise that, Larry?"

"I do. A pity Harker wasn't there." Larrabee poured a drink of cooled water for Fay. "But don't fret too much over this one, Fay. There are going to be other finds. Other, far more important finds."

Fay leaned back in the canvas chair, drinking the water gratefully, looking through slanted eyes at Larrabee. The thin white cotton shirt hanging outside her vermilion shorts strained, her long slender tanned legs crossed, one scuffed sandal swinging from a toe, she looked to Larrabee the ultimate example of the perfectly desirable and the completely unattainable. Her pale hair that, in formal dress framed her face, had been caught up for working into a band of red cloth, studded with brilliants. In her eyes all men—and Larrabee in particular—existed as workers who could dig and



shovel more strongly than a woman and were valuable on that account alone to dig down into the secrets of the past.

Now she studied the mysterious globe and drank the water.

"A strange world," she said at last. "Where are the twelve continents, the encompassed seas, the familiar earth we know?" Her voice brought unease to Larrabee. "Have you thought what the Conclave will say? Their reactions are predictable, black and twisted and all that is despicably base in man—but what will they say? What will they do?"

Mulvers gave his usual snort of contempt; but he, too, Larrabee knew, felt a chill breath at mention of the Conclave.

"We're in the age of Steam, Fay," Larrabee said gently.

"The day of the Conclave and all they stand for is over."

"But do they know that?" she flashed at him angrily.

"They must learn. The light of science does not blind. A man cannot be a full man unless he combines in himself something of the poet, the scientist, the man of action—and the perception of a gentleman."

"Only three hundred years ago they were burning men for believing and saying that, Larry," Mulvers said.

"The Conclave is a disgusting atavism, an anachronism that all men of goodwill should overthrow, once and for all."

"You'll never do it," Fay said. "Not while men and women believe in the Conclave's power and their sorcery. They have too strong a hold. Even golden Rathvane sleeps uneasily when the men of the Conclave prowl the streets at night."

"Superstition," Larrabee said angrily. "The Council—"

"The Council dares nothing. And you know it."

"We might be better employed seeing what Torrence and Custance are up to," said Mulvers drily.

Larrabee nodded sharply. "At least," he said with a flash of malicious glee, "if the Conclave and Torrence meet head on, I'd like a seat—but at a safe distance."

Fay rose lithely and, with Mulvers, went from the tent. Larrabee hesitated a moment, looking at the globe. Then he stared after Fay as she walked in the sunshine. The two were strangely alike; mysterious, inexplicable, coming into his life to alarm and change. But, cleaving to his training as a noble of Rathvane, Larrabee's last glance, as he left the tent, was across his sleeping bag at the case hung above it, the case in which his sword of nobility glittered and winked back at him.



## t w o

The sun struck back viciously from the red sands of the desert and immediately Larrabee could feel the heat eating up through the soles of his sandals. He walked quickly ; lean and lithe, almost disjointed in suppleness, his face, no matter how hard he tried to compose it, always showing a bold and reckless humour that had in the past brought no love from the staid oldsters of the Council. But they knew his worth. They'd still appoint him leader on expeditions of more bloody danger than a mere archaeological dig.

The Expedition's tents lay neatly ranked behind him now, his own tent used for storage ; he preferred to sleep in the laboratory tent so as to be on hand the moment anything new turned up. Ahead the raw gashes in the desert showed flecked with the figures of work-people, painstakingly continuing the first clumsy work of the steam shovels. He nodded approvingly. Despite the enormous attraction of the new find the amateurs were going on with their own jobs. That sort of discipline was hard to come by in these fields where people were off the lead and he, for one, didn't blame them. He paused on the lip of the earliest cuttings where the steam shovels had ripped away the sand and packed earth to a depth of two hundred feet to expose the rock below.

In places that rock had been attacked with steam drills and at one particular point they had punctured clean through a period of time that Fay said was nearer two hundred million years to uncover a plastic globe of a world that could exist only in a nightmare.

The sand, sterile of interest, had been cleared by steam suction pumps from an area roughly two hundred yards on a side, banked back in smooth waves. Storm winds would be a problem ; but Larrabee held confidence in the devices of the Steam Age for beating the age-old desert.

Age-old desert. Yes—and beneath it they had found the first sign of another intelligence—apart from the Gurone.

He stepped on to the steam lift and went whisking down the face of sand towards the rock cap. Bustle and activity everywhere about cheered him. No matter what the problems facing him, mankind would solve them all.

Away over at the far end of the excavations some sand had already crept back across the original, chance-found, wind-



cleared rock fissure. But for that naturally cleared area above the fissure and the finds brought up, Larrabee and all the complex organisation of the Expedition would not be here now. That fissure had been explored and the trend of the finds had given them this area as a good starting point. No one had expected to find another plastic article—they were normally found in much higher levels—and no one, certainly, had expected a globe like this.

Perhaps, Larrabee wondered darkly as he dropped to the rock cap, perhaps Torrence *had* planted the damn thing?

As he descended the last section through the rock he was joined on the platform by young Toby. Smiling, as Toby could always make him smile, Larrabee said: "How's it coming, Toby?"

"Fine, Larry, fine. I'm through the quarter finals."

Larrabee chuckled. "I didn't really mean the Rathvane fencing championship—but that's good news. Who do you meet next?"

"Charlot."

"Hum. He's good. Very good."

Toby laughed. He was tall and lithe, with the clear skin and healthy flush of a youngster with an aim in life. He was studying hard to be a steam engineer, and Larrabee liked him. "You forget, Larry, that you taught me some of the higher points of fencing—and that you have beaten Charlot five times in a row."

"Well, now—"

"Why didn't you enter again, Larry? Fencing Champion of golden Rathvane for the seventh consecutive year—"

"Time, Toby, time. Haven't you heard of the globe?" Larrabee punched the youngster on the bicep. "That's the sort of thing that means more to me than a championship now."

Toby hadn't heard. By the time they'd reached the section trench and joined Torrence, Fay and the others, Toby was bubbling with the excitement possessing all of them.

Torrence was busily directing workmen in slicing through an angle of trench. Above them the slit of sunshine glowed orange and very far away.

"What's happening?" demanded Larrabee.

Eagerly, Mulvers turned. "Look, Larry—there, in the side—"



Larrabee saw. Protruding from the sliced earth, clean and sharp and very obviously man-made, a metal boss or knob thrust out, tantalisingly, beckoningly. Larrabee touched it. It was ice cold.

"We're uncovering as fast as we can—"

"I thought that the line of trench might advantageously be widened, Larrabee," said Torrence officiously.

"Bad archaeology," Larrabee said. "But understandable." He did not countermand the order.

For the time being the interest of the globe had been superseded by the desire to uncover more of this strange metal object. That the metal had remained uncorroded and unruined through the unthinkable gulfs of time it must have lain here impressed and awed Larrabee. Perhaps their whole time-scale was wrong; it might be easier for their imaginations to conceive of that than that this metal, this globe, had remained hidden in the earth for two hundred million years.

Reliefs came on and Larrabee and the others took time out to return to the cook tent and eat hasty meals. The day dwindled. Gas containers were brought down and lurid flares flamed through the night, throwing wavering shadows into the trench and highlighting men's faces, the gleam of eyes, the clenched teeth as the picks delicately brought out pinches of earth about the metal. And the metal itself gleamed, a greenish-blue sheen that carried overtones of menace to Larrabee's tired brain.

"It's round," Mulvers said, jiggling in impatience. "A round doorway, ten feet diameter, sharp edged and clean as the day it was made. And it goes back into the earth—"

Diggers were crawling in and out of the tunnel dug into the earth alongside the metal object. They'd gone through for twenty feet and still the enigmatic metal wall extended alongside their progress. "It's like digging a tunnel alongside a metal wall," one of them said, banging dirt and dust from his shorts. Despite the chill of the night he was sweating. "Who knows how far it goes?"

There was no sleep for anyone. The sheer audacity of finding anything like this shook them all. Forgotten were flint arrowheads and scrapers, shards of pottery, inexplicable plastic artifacts. Here was a mystery on a colossal scale.

Larrabee and Torrence worked on the face of the door. Here levers and tumblers studded the metal, immovable,



unyielding, and yet painstakingly freed from clogging dirt. Fay and Tony and Mulvers crowded to look and advise and help. It was all guesswork, men struggling with a recalcitrant lock in the darkness.

Just what combination worked the oracle, no one afterwards could say.

At one moment Larrabee was peering in the flickering ruby light at the metal contrivances ; the next he was pushed back to fall, astounded and shocked. Torrence was shouting. Fay, Toby and Mulvers were scuttling to one side, out of the way of the moving mass that approached, rotating.

Behind them there ensued a wild scramble as men and women struggled to climb up out of the trench. Some flares were knocked over. Shadows rushed down.

Like a screw stopper in a bottle on its side, the cap rotated and moved forward. Larrabee scrambled up, clutched at Torrence, hauled him back.

He heard a yell from Toby. " An opening ! A door ! "

They rushed around to the left hand side, where the trench gave easy access to the side of the stopper that had thrust forward into the cut. Here the screw threads were plain, ringing the shaft behind the stopper. The threads were square section, three inches across, shining and clean, slick and machined. For a space of two feet the threads had been cut away and here, dark and hostile in the metal, a square opening gaped.

At once, seizing up a torch, Toby leapt forward, vanished into the door. Torrence gave a cry. He grasped at Larrabee. They could hear Toby shouting ; his words rang metallic and hollow, muffled. They could not understand him.

Fay was standing directly before the door. The rotation of the giant stopper ceased. Everything, apart from the distant roarings from Toby, was quiet. Then Mulvers pressed forward. Fay, shouting something that Larrabee did not catch, jumped after Toby. Mulvers followed.

Within the rectangle light glared and fell. Shadows writhed. Larrabee caught a glimpse of shining machinery. He moved forward ; but Torrence, angrily, thrust him back and jumped himself. Before Torrence could reach the door a metal plate slid across. It snapped shut like the trap of an *Opteradent*. Torrence thumped angrily upon the closed metal with his fist.



"Open up, you damned fools ! Let me in !"

Larrabee caught Torrence's arm. "I don't believe they shut the door. It's trapped them—" He hammered hard, shouting, then straining to hear. No sound came from within.

Fear dried his throat. The very absence of violence in that closing door boded more ill than all the clamour of brass locks and bolts. He battered on the smooth slick metal again.

Torrence, stumbling back, shouted again, high and shrill.

"It's moving ! The screw ! It's turning !"

The square-cut threads were revolving, slowly, catching a runnel of light from a torch, turning back. The stopper was returning to the jar. Real fear touched Larrabee then.

The screw threads rotated remorselessly, winding back the case beneath, which did not turn with them. The door was being drawn back into the metal wall, back into the unyielding darkness in which it had lain for two hundred million years.

But it was taking back with it three live human beings.

A madness touched Larrabee then. He seized a rock and thrust it down on to the treads where they vanished into the darkness of the casing. He watched with a redness roaring in his brain the smooth metal revolve and crush the rock, crushing it to a fine powder that dribbled gently down. He hammered with his fists, kicked with his sandals. He could do nothing. With that ponderous movement that told of titanic energies at work somewhere beyond, the screw retracted into the casing, drew back until it vanished and all that could be seen was the cryptic metal cap.

Even though with the loss of Fay the world had come to an end for Larrabee there was yet work to be done. They had done everything they could. The metal portal remained implacably sealed. The tunnel being dug alongside the metal shaft now extended for half a mile, and still the end of the metal was not in sight. The dig went on. More points of penetration through the rock had yielded many more amazing finds ; but Larrabee took them and catalogued them with the enthusiasm of a dead man. Fay might never have been destined for him—or for any man—yet her image would not leave his eyes, her memory smiled always in his brain. He did not sleep well.

Custance, the geologist, had bemoaned bitterly that he had not been there at that vital time. Torrence told him sourly



that if he had he, too, might now be walled up in some damned metal prison deep beneath the earth. More of the enigmatic globes had been found. Larrabee catalogued them dully, placing them all in a row—eight of them. Even a dullard could have noticed the gradual but positive increase of the white areas around the poles.

"Whoever made those globes," Torrence said, "was picturing a world gradually being strangled by ice."

Larrabee did not feel inclined to argue. Custance, all his professional ethics outraged, protested. "But we believe that the world has remained in the same state as it was settled from its birth. How could the polar ice caps increase? It's just not possible."

"Re-think, Custance, re-think," growled Torrence.

They had asked for a new artist to replace Fay and a nice young girl, Angela, with golden hair and childish eyes, had flown out aboard her father's airship, all eagerness and enthusiasm. Her father, Domrin, talked father-talk to Larrabee. He was tall, grizzled, with the shoulders still of a man who had worked in the mines.

"She's my only daughter, Larrabee. You look after her." He pushed down on the hilt of his sword. "Tragic business, about young Fay. Tragic."

"Do they blame me, personally, in Rathvane?"

"No-o. Not really. The story isn't believed by some—"

"Those damned wizards of the Conclave, I suppose?"

Domrin drew the corners of his mouth down. "Is it safe to talk like that here?"

Larrabee laughed savagely. "Here! If nowhere else. Since when has anyone of the Conclave dared work on any scientific pursuit? If you were a member of the Conclave, would you allow your daughter here, digging up the past?"

"I see your point. They claim, of course, that the dread guilt of the past has punished you all for impiety—"

"Yes. I expected that."

They were standing on the end of the pit, looking across at the workers, like ants, filling the air with purposeful activity. Steam shovels chuffed lustily into the sunshine. The approach of Torrence was unseen and they turned sharply as he spoke. He panted from the run and his voice was sharp with urgency.

"Larrabee! Domrin! Is this true? Your chief engineer tells me that the Gurone have been seen near Rathvane itself—"



Larrabee was as startled as Torrence. The two archaeologists faced the city man. Domrin's face took on the same expression as Torrence's and Larrabee's—as any man of Rathvane when he talked about the Gurone.

"Yes," he said heavily. "Yes. The reports cannot be disbelieved, nor can the Council deny them. We elect half the Council to rule over us and the other half are supposed by the accident of heredity to be able to govern. Don't ask me if the system is perfect. But this I know. If the Council do not take rapid and drastic action, then the Gurone will over-run us. They will sweep man from the face of the Earth." He stared unseeingly across the red desert. "And a new race of intelligence will rule the world."

"New, but inferior to man," Torrence said harshly.

"No one knows from whence they came. But that they have flourished on their five continents now for the last twenty thousand years is without doubt. And they began at one small locus—a tiny mountain stronghold in Gurone itself!"

The conception of that to any human being was always staggering, and unpalatable. It diminished the stature of man in his own eyes. It posed the question: "Is man still fitted to rule the Earth? Has he outlived his usefulness? Must he give way to another intelligence?"

"No!" Larrabee said, hard and short, biting the word out. "We'll beat the Gurone, despite all—"

"Tell us what happened," demanded Torrence. "We are so cut-off here. The telegraph finishes at Pike's Point, two hundred miles off."

"Yes," said Domrin. "I saw the semaphore working when we flew over. Lonely outpost, that. Well, as to what has happened, a raiding party of Gurone smashed across a caravan less than five hundred miles from Rathvane itself."

"So near," breathed Torrence. Then: "But that must mean they have landed on our continent!"

Domrin nodded heavily without speaking. Gurone. The very name struck dread into the hearts of Earthmen—for the Gurone were not men, and yet they were intelligent, full of vitality and an incredible vicious ferocity. Men said you had to kill a Gurone ten times before he consented to believe he was dead.



"So long as we remember that they are, however tough and intelligent and adaptable, inferior to men, then we will win," Domrin said in his authoritative way.

"And," Torrence added with bitter sarcasm, "just so long as the Conclave allow us to work towards that end. They prevent experiment, research—they prohibit enquiries into vital subjects that may give us superior weapons—"

He didn't have to go on. His hearers knew only too well the blighting effect of the Conclave's backward looking policies, holding in thrall half the people of Rathvane, maintaining them in the status of blind and obedient slaves, thrall to their fear of sorcery and ancient superstition.

"Damn the Conclave!" said Larrabee, suddenly. "And damn the Gurone. Isolated here we may be. But we have a job to do, and I am determined that we shall carry on—and uncover the secrets of the lost civilisation that lies beneath our feet."

Domrin was interested. As a noble of Rathvane with all the privileges and responsibilities of nobility he was acutely aware of the problems facing archaeologists, as he was, like Larrabee and Torrence and the others here, aware of the latest developments in steam engineering, in archery, in fencing, in medicine and in the last fashion for inverted sonnets in the epic form that had come out of the neighbouring kingdom of Travanslay.

"Tell me of your expectations, Larrabee," he said. "Graybrook mentioned something of startling discoveries—"

He stopped talking. Larrabee was staring at him, hard and cold-eyed. A tiny pulse throbbed in his neck. "So you saw Fay's father! I should have expected that. What, exactly, did Graybrook have to say?"

Domrin was not discomfited. "I'd not intended to mention it to you. Please forgive me." Domrin gestured. "I don't think I need elaborate on the feelings of a noble of Rathvane whose daughter has been swallowed up in the earth? Yet Graybrook said that he could not, in his heart, blame you. He read the official report. No one could have done anything once the metal door had slid to. But, Larrabee, I would not seek to meet Graybrook to explain. I would keep out of his way when you are next in Rathvane."

"I am due for Grade M assignment in a week." Larrabee spoke without caring; this sudden reversion to that tragic



event had opened up wounds, lacerated his mind with contempt and self-guilt. He ought to have done something ! At the very least, he should have been with Fay when she was trapped, and not a young lad on the threshold of his career, with the fencing championship of Rathvane to contemplate, and a jiggling eager biologist. "They're all dead now, anyway. Let's not talk of that—"

"I'm sorry." Domrin spoke with the exquisite politeness of a noble treading dangerous ground. "May I offer you refreshment ? I have an excellent Couroc, forty-three, in the cabin . . ."

They went along to Domrin's airship, tethered to her mast among the other airships of the Expedition, and in the cabin beneath the swelling bag they drank the Couroc, forty-three—and it was, as Domrin had promised, very good.

### t h r e e

During the ensuing week the talk on the site dealt as much with the incursion of the Gurone as with the finds being brought up daily. Everyone was uncomfortably aware of their isolated position, two hundred miles from Pike's Point, the nearest spot of civilisation—and that only a semaphore relay station in the link connecting Rathvane with the coast, skirting the Demming Desert. Their consolation was that the Gurone were hardly likely to consider an archaeological camp in the desert worthy an attack. At least—so they hoped.

Larrabee's Grade M assignment had come at a most inconvenient time ; but there was absolutely no thought of postponement. All men must be men of parts, able to do any task within their own category and willing to shoulder their share of the dirty jobs. How else could civilisation run ?

Once, talking to Torrence, Larrabee had discussed that, and Torrence, laughing, his red hair shaking loose as always, had said : "That would be as bad as the Gurone. I am told they have people who do a single job all their lives—just the one thing from the time they are old enough until the day they die."

"Monstrous," agreed Larrabee. "Think of sitting in an office all day—*every day* ! No thank you !" He'd just finished a month's Grade O assignment and was still feeling



choked and claustrophobic from desk work. He could remember as though it were yesterday his father returning home, grimacing and shaking his broad shoulders as though to rid them of the clinging—and imaginary—feel of cobwebs from Central Archives, and yet his father and mother had been dead for fifteen years. Now Larry was Larrabee of the house and lands of Larrabee, noble of Rathvane. Yet tomorrow, early he would be leaving the archaeological life he loved and setting out in his personal airship to old Rathvane there to do his month's Grade M Assignment. He sighed. It was impossible to postpone it ; but he wished he didn't have to leave now.

Torrence was a good man and would cope wonderfully when the chief was away. Custance was working like a maniac and the new girl, Angela, was turning out drawings of the finds that, if they did not possess the fine line and delicacy of Fay's work, were still remarkably good. Larrabee could leave the site in good hands. But he still wished that he could be an archaeologist for a few more months of the year.

The drive for scientific ways of thinking expressed itself in different reactions in different men. Archaeology to Larrabee was a part and parcel of some ill-defined greater aim intensely absorbing but a means and not an end in itself. These formless dreams had been with him since his earliest childhood ; his mother had chided him, scoffing in her laughing, gentle way, telling him that he had delusions of grandeur. He didn't know if he had. All he knew was that the devouring need to *know* possessed him, finding its outlet for the moment in probing for the secrets of civilisations long dead.

In other men the desire to know drove them along different paths. Packing up his few belongings in a wicker hamper, Larrabee thought with affection of old Professor Higham. Yes, it would be very good to see the old scientist again and to talk over with him some of the problems bedevilling Larrabee. Perhaps, now, if the professor had been there, in the trench on that terrible night, he might have saved all, have been able to halt that inexorable retraction of the screw as it turned back into the earth, taking with it the slim loveliness of Fay . . . Dreams. Just wishful thinking.



Larrabee opened the case above his sleeping bag and took down the sword. He ran his hands over the black leather scabbard and plain baldric. Then he slid the leather over his shoulder, strapped up the buckles and felt once again fully dressed, a civilised man of Rathvane, a sword at his side.

"Ship's all fuelled and ready, Larrabee," said Max, putting his urchin head in at the tent flap. "I checked the filling myself."

Larrabee broke away from his memories and turned. Max was a steam engineer of the first class, and an airship man second to none. He possessed a grin that extended, so his friends swore, from one ear to the other. His nose was a mere putty dot. But in his broad powerful hands lay the cunning and skill of a master mechanic.

"Coming, Max. And have you wished good flying weather on me?"

Max made a rude sound. "When a man is such a darn fool as to insist on hydrogen in his bag instead of helium, when the stuff is so plentiful, then I wash my hands on him."

It was an old argument. Walking out into the sunshine with his leather flying togs opened in the heat, Larrabee stared mockingly at Max. "And where do you think the extra range comes from then? I've enough fuel on board to stoke the engines all the way to Rathvane without a break for replenishment. Could you do that on helium?"

"Maybe not. But I'd be sure of getting there in one piece." Max shook his untidy head. "Flamers are awful."

"Cheer me up, please."

Maybe some thought occurred to Max then, for he at once found some immediate occupation about Larrabee's airship that took him off across the sand at a trot. Larrabee walked on in silence. Cheerful chit-chat had not been in his line since Fay and Toby and Mulvers had gone.

Custance was waiting by the side of the wicker, steel-framed cabin with a bag of mail. People working on the site took every opportunity of sending back messages. He slung the bag inboard and shouted its estimated weight to Max, busy with his bags of sand. Water for ballast, here in the Demming Desert, was a luxury they couldn't afford. All the water their tiny oasis produced was consumed by the steam engines and the personnel.



There was very little wind. The bag ballooned above, streamlined, spanned by taut wires, pulling docilely at the wicker cabin. A healthy fire roared in the furnace and the meters showed a fine head of steam. The turbines could work up to full revolutions in no time. Like any good aviator, Larrabee walked around the ship, checking all the vital points. He was voyaging alone and would have to combine all the aerial functions in himself; that he enjoyed.

He saw Torrence walking up and turned, bracing himself for the parting.

There was no elation in Torrence; rather, the archaeologist appeared subdued, anxious, fretful.

"Have a safe journey, Larrabee."

"Thank you, Torrence." A pause. Then: "No final questions? Everything under control?"

"Yes. We'll get along all right." Torrence unslung the short, reflex bow of metal and wood slung over his shoulder. He held it out to Larrabee. "You'd better take your bow, and this full double-quiver. They might be—"

Larrabee took them. The wood was warm to the touch. "Thank you for your thought, Torrence. But I doubt if the eagles will bother us much—not here in the desert."

"I'm not worried about eagles."

Max poked a head around the rudder. "Everything set, Larrabee. In this heat she's difficult to weigh off—"

"Right, Max. Goodbye Torrence, Custance. Keep digging." He sprang into the cabin and, putting the bow and quiver down to hand, went at once to the controls. Heat from the furnace ravened out despite the screening. "All set!"

Men tailing on the ropes walked away, the craft swayed, he released two ballast bags—and the airship was aloft.

The twin propellers, square-bladed, turned, revving at once into blurred discs of light. The ship nosed forward. He waved back at the dark figures waving from below. Then he turned the ship on course and opened up the throttle, watching the governors spin narrower and narrower up their shafts.

He was off.

Larrabee had never given his airship a name. Most ships carried girls' names and he had never felt the courage openly to call her 'Fay.'



Two hours and a hundred miles out he paused a moment from stoking the engine, closing down both gauze fire screens, and leaning back to mop his forehead. He was flying at no great height, mainly because he had no wish to rise so that he would have to drop a great deal of ballast to compensate for the cooling gas in his bats. Operations in really hot conditions were always tricky, always making it difficult to find a realistic pressure height. He uncorked a water bottle and took a deep draught. Always, now, the action of unscrewing a jar made him think . . .

Anyway, he forced his thoughts back to mundane channels, if he rose too high and cooled his gas and dropped ballast then he would have to valve extravagantly when he wanted to land, and no aviator liked valving with hydrogen.

The ship drove on, another hour seeing her pass soaring over Pike's Point. The little hamlet didn't bother to turn out to give him a wave ; but the gigantic arms of the semaphore were clacking away like a drunken marionette. He pressed on, turning a little north, heading directly for Rathvane. The weather stayed perfect.

Passing low over a rounded, tree-topped hill, he saw before him a wide and wonderful panorama open up ; a verdant valley clustered with little villages the shimmer of rivers the quiet cattle grazing. It was a fine picture.

His attention was taken by a cluster of dots on the horizon. He reached for the big telescope in its beackets to pick them up, out of curiosity.

He focussed the instrument. He felt his face stiffen.

Opteradents !

There was no mistaking the gigantic flying beasts, with their slow, purposeful, sluggish wing-beats their extended tooth-studded jaws, their whip-like barbed tails. Grimly, Larrabee adjusted the fine focus.

Yes.

Yes, there they were, perched on the backs of the flying Opteradents. He could see the glitter of weapons, the flare of skin trappings, could hear in his imagination the unearthly screeching. He lowered the telescope. There were at least a dozen.

According to men's reckoning, then, he would have to kill that posse one hundred and twenty times.



They must have flitted over here on one of their raiding flights, ready to swoop and attack anything that looked man-like. They'd probably left a trail of burning and gutted farm-houses, their inhabitants slain and cremated in the ruins. He could have landed and sought refuge. But that was not the way of a noble of Rathvane.

Methodically, he checked his equipment. He had with him only his leather flying togs and a toughened hide breastplate and shield. He laced on the breastplate and wished grimly for a backplate to go with it. He strapped on a short broad stabbing sword for his right side, leaving the long rapier of his nobility swinging from the baldric on his left. A dagger thrust through a cross belt. The bow—thank the Great Ones that Torrence had thought of that!—one quiver of the double to hand by the ship's controls, the other slung over his back, the feathered arrows protruding up over his right shoulder. He gripped the plaited wicker of the cabin edge and tried not to think too much of the giant expanse of the bag above him, ballooning and vulnerable.

This might teach him to go riding alone in future—most men preferred to carry a spine archer at the least. But, who would have thought that the Gurone would penetrate here, into the heartland of golden Rathvane!

The Opteradents winged in more closely and now he could see with the naked eye the repulsive Gurone astride their scaly backs. Each Gurone was on the average four foot six tall, with flat, bulbous head, puffed at the sides—oh, yes, their brains were large enough. Their own jaws contained fangs rather than teeth, and their small, six-fingered hands were minutely delicate at murder and arson. Clad in skins and pelts, wearing gaudy and barbarian metal ornaments, bosses and buckles, they were a terrifying sight.

Larrabee studied their weapons. The familiar long barbed spear. Yes, he knew about that. They had their swords and their axes swinging from thongs about the Opteradents. For shields each one relied on a small round targe, equipped with a spike in the boss, to be used as a weapon at close quarters. Tough. Vicious. Deadly. Almost unkillable. But Larrabee fancied that a good shaft through their chests would dispose of them.



## four

Through the thunder of his own machinery and the whine of the propellers, he could hear the ear-rending screeching as they keened their war-cries, closing in for the kill.

The wicker cabin of the ship was fifteen feet long, the twin propellers revolving on outriggers aft. He checked the transmission and then walked forward, past the enclosed turbines and boilers, to the roofed-in forepart. His point of most danger, then, was aft, when the cabin was open. He went back and kicked a few lumps of coal that had fallen from the battened pile just aft of the boiler furnace. His eye fell on a cloth-covered bundle that he did not recognise. He would have passed it by but for the familiar gleam from a rent at the end and, lifting the cloth, he saw a bundle of assegais.

"Now who the devil could have put those there?" Then he chuckled. Max, of course. For Max had weighed off the craft and the slightest excess weight would have brought him foaming to Larrabee to know why. "Good old Max!"

Feeling much better, he picked up the assegais and arranged them to hand about the craft. The Gurone had not waited for him to ready himself; they bored in with the Optera's wings beating more rapidly as though the flying beasts scented the coming battle. The smell of scented woods floated strongly up to him, through the engine smell and the stink of oil.

The last task was to sling six ballast bags on ropes, dangling, over the side, three on the port and three to starboard. Then the Gurone attacked.

The first one in their line of assault came straight in at the cabin and Larrabee put a shaft clean through the Optera's neck and the Gurone behind. The beasts slewed away. The next one took a shaft in the Optera's belly and Larrabee cursed. Windage was playing hell with his deflection. The third shaft missed. A thrown spear crashed into the wicker, splintering it.

Like the beasts they were the Gurone were going for the living being at first, ignoring the airship. A fourth and a fifth shaft sped from Larrabee's bow. Gurone were circling him now, and then, to his horror and astonishment, a new factor entered the picture.

Of the ten still left in the fight two had remained circling, keeping their distance. The wings of their mounts slanted against the blood-red sun and he realised that the day was



going. Even as a beast-mounted beast bore in on him, screeching, and he seized up an assegai and hurled it cleanly into that devilish face, he glimpsed a puff of smoke from one of the distant Gurone.

His brain, racing, was wondering what the smoke could be even as he whirled to hurl another assegai into the body of a Gurone leaning out from his mount to grasp a support wire, screeching. Gurone and Optera whirled away. And then a jagged hole appeared in the wicker side of the cabin and another hole directly opposite it on the other side.

Snatching up another assegai—the heavier metal was more effective at this close range than the bow—numbed disbelief shocked through Larrabee's brain. What had caused those two holes? What new devilish invention had the Gurone developed now?

He hurled the assegai savagely at a Gurone sweeping up from below. He flung a quick glance at the two ominously circling figures beyond. The dramatic flare of wing and beak, of spear and skin cloak against the sun etched his retinas. Silently, malevolently, they circled out of range.

On the other side another Gurone had wing-slipped in and half balanced on the back of his Optera was clutching for the wicker rim. Larrabee crossed the cabin space, drawing his short sword and it came over and down in a silver arc that finished athwart the Gurone's leather skull cap. The beast screeched as he fell all the awful distance to the ground beneath.

"You won't crawl out of that death," shouted Larrabee, tensed and exhilarated and yet—thinking of that puff of smoke, those two inexplicable holes—strangely anxious.

For a moment the Gurone drew off. He had settled only for four—some bore wounds; but wounds to the beast-men of Gurone were less than gnat-bites. Time to take up the bow again and shoot until the range came down. Even as he drew and took aim on a circling Optera, he saw that puff of smoke. This time he heard the crash as a section of the steam engine shattered. A gout of steam lashed out, hissing shrilly above the screeching of the Gurone and the flailing of the propellers, the keen of wind in the wires.

"Whatever it is they're using," he panted, drawing and shooting with blurring rapidity, "it's not steam-powered. Our steam-peltas couldn't be carried aboard an Opteradent. Too



heavy and bulky. And it's not a steam-cannon—they're outlawed for us by the Conclave—" He stopped talking to himself as the next puff of smoke from the other circling flier jetted. Despite who and what he was, he ducked.

He didn't hear the crash that told of a hit.

So far he had been content to drive along at his best speed and at the same height. Now it was time—he slashed the ropes holding two of the ballast bags and then did the same for the two on the other side. The airship rose at once, gallantly.

Leaning over he was able to take deliberate aim and sink three shafts into the same Gurone. He fell off his mount. His body dwindled in size and the screeching dwindled with it.

But the others, overcoming this new tactic, rose, the wing-beats of the Opteradents speeding up, strong and powerful.

There was time to stanch the flow of steam from the boiler. A wadded rag, a wooden plug and savage blows from the hilt of his sword had to suffice. Then he sprang for the rim of the cabin, looked over.

The wild, fanged mouth of an Optera glared back, the jaws slavering. Larrabee's sword jumped into his hand and thrust in a wrenching of shoulder muscles. The Optera's head vanished. Something whistled past his head and he heard the shearing thunk of a Gurone spear behind him.

Two more Gurone were planing in to make a chancy landing on the open after end of the cabin. Larrabee dropped his bow and setting his shield from over his left shoulder into place before him, he charged aft, blade low.

Two violent blows on his shield and then he stormed on the first Gurone; a low thrust sank the blade deep into slippery flesh. Withdrawing he had to raise the weapon and strike down again at a leering face. The second Gurone whirled a long heavy sword for such a small height; Larrabee played the old trick and slid down and forward, shield high, sword low. Four destructive thrusts disposed of that one and he went over the side, legs kicking space.

He turned, gasping, blood from an ignored wound pouring over his right shoulder. A Gurone had lassoed one of his propellers and the blades whirled into destruction.

Even as he looked the transmission lashed itself into a frenzy, snapped and the free end looped around like a giant cheese-cutter, slashed the Gurone into two halves.



He looked about him desperately. Where next . . . ?

The taste of bile was in his mouth, sweat started from his body ; he was shivering with the cold of evening and height. He could see no enemy trying to board. Then the two circling figures, dark against the sunset, broke again into those fateful puffs of smoke.

Again he heard no strike. But the airship was falling. She was appreciably lower now. He slashed the two remaining ballast bags ; the airship still sank.

Now he knew where the projectiles shot by the Gurone were striking. And there was nothing he could do about that. The steam engine was slowing ; the turbines running with a deeper whine. He doubted that he had time to refuel the furnace. He must jettison anything movable and hope for a soft landing.

He took most pleasure in jettisoning the assegais in the bodies of three Gurone and their mounts. But still they came on. He looked over the side. The ground was alarmingly close. All his ballast had gone. He snatched up the last four assegais, made sure both swords were firm in their scabbards, slung the shield back on to his left shoulder and took a firm grip on the wicker rail.

The airship struck hard. He staggered backwards and then thrust himself over forwards in a desperate lunge. He hit the grass and staggered up, sparks jumping before his eyes. He glared around frenziedly. The Gurone were too wise to dismount and attack him on foot knowing their best plan would be to strike down at him from their flying mounts.

And then the world blew up.

A spark from his boiler fire had caught at the dissipating gas from the wounds caused by the enemy—and the ship had blossomed into a single enormous flower of fire.

He was struck spinning in the lurid glare, sent staggering away feeling his skin scorch. A dark shadow swooped down and only superb training and endurance saved him. The descending blow from the Optera's barbed tail caught his upflung shield. He was knocked sprawling again.

In that frightful moment he expected to feel the bite of a Gurone weapon through his body. But none came. He wrenched himself up, gasping, trying to see.

The Gurone were circling—but they were circling up.



Quite automatically he hurled an assegai, saw it fall short. He unslung his bow and notched three quick arrows upwards. One struck a Gurone but, as so often happened, the Gurone took no notice.

Then he heard the sound—the blessed sound.

A steady churning of propellers, the hiss of steam machinery at full throttle, the uncanny thunk-thunk-thunk of a steam-peltas throwing bolts as fast as the hammers could smash against them. In the uproar he saw another Gurone swerve and fall, literally riddled and shredded to pieces by iron bolts.

But the two Gurone with their puffs of smoke had flown.

He stood there, bloodied, panting, defiant, as the airship steadied above him and a rope ladder was flung down. It took perhaps more effort than all that had gone before to climb up that ladder, to step in at the wicker-framed entry and salute. He saw before him the leather-clad figures of men of the Air Service.

Someone began to speak, quickly, excitedly, something about a great fight. Larrabee couldn't see too well. He cut the man off short. "My ship's down there," he said. "I'd like"—he gulped air—"I'd like you to pick up my luggage."

"Yes—sir!" the unknown voice said.

And after that he wanted only to put his head down and sleep until the Great Ones stirred in their vaults of time.

"Science, my dear Larrabee, does not blind us to our responsibilities in the world."

"The Light of Science does not Blind," Larrabee quoted. "Yes, I know that. But, professor, it seems to have frightened the Conclave pretty effectively."

Professor Higham made a sound that Larrabee could only term a snort of disgust. They were sitting in the rear seats of the professor's vis-a-vis park carriage, an elegant cherry red shell exquisitely sprung on five-foot wheels, drawn by a pair of fiery-nostrilled greys. Dumpton, on the box, had no need for the decorated whip sunk into its boot.

All about them the pulse of life in old Rathvane beat loudly and animatedly; carriages passing, riders trotting a weaving path in and out, the pedestrian ways filled with gay figures in brilliant summer plumage, the benevolent sun showering all impartially with his golden coins of largesse. Twelve levels rose the city, compact and yet open with many parks and grass-green spaces, where shade trees spread gracious branches and flowers bloomed to fill the air with perfume from myriads



of banks and beds. Fountains splashed and gurgled, it seemed, from every vantage point the ingenuity of man and the power of his pumps could reach with water pipes. Yes—it was good to be alive and particularly good to be in Rathvane this golden summer—no matter that the Gurone ravened at the nation's door and the young men sharpened their weapons for the coming fray.

Professor Higham broke off their conversation to raise his hat to a passing lady. She bowed smilingly in return.

He was a strange-looking man to be a noble of Rathvane ; relatively small beside the tall form of Larrabee, bent over, twinkling eyes aglitter beneath tufted brows, a nose like the ram of a warship and in his round skull a brain that dared to penetrate regions feared and distrusted and expressly forbidden by the Conclave. Professor Higham, it was certain, entertained no doubts about the men of the Conclave.

As he had often said, heatedly, to Larrabee : “ We are men and men were meant to pry and peer and lift stones and be damned inquisitive and have a nose that snuffed into any and everything, whether it concerns us or not.”

Now, rattling along in the sunshine on the way to Graybrook, he expounded his volatile yet hard-headed philosophy. In part : “ If the Conclave push the free thinkers very much more there will be serious trouble—damn serious trouble, by Steam ! I suppose you heard they sniffed out young Prowdon's experiments ? Lad was working well on metallic alloys—our own metals aren't hard enough or elastic enough or light enough for the work we demand. Well, he was accused of black sorcery—yes, by Steam, black sorcery ! ”

“ What happened to him ? ”

“ They had him condemned. At the moment he's somewhere stoking an Air Service ship on full punishment time. I tell you, Larry, if the Council can't take stronger measures about that death-and-damnation Conclave then—then— ”

“ Why don't you stand for election ? ”

“ Me ? Embroil myself in politics ! No thank you ! ” He half turned to stare at Larrabee. “ How old are you now, Larry, thirty-four ? ”

“ Thirty-five. In another five years I'll have to take my seat in the Grand Council.”

“ Yes, well, as a hereditary noble you have that responsibility. I can't say I envy you, by Steam, no ! ”



"I have thought that the hereditarily appointed half of the Council sometimes shoulders a greater task than the elected half."

"No wonder," interrupted Higham. "They have no seat to lose."

Dumpton blew his coachhorn making Higham jump. "Damn you, Dumpton! You love doing that infernal noise, don't you."

Dumpton looked back over his shoulder. "Nerves are in bad condition, that's your trouble, professor. You ought to sign on for extended assignments—"

"Confound you, Dumpton! I'm too old for work now, and well you know it. Just because you're a top-flight architect you don't have to crow." He fumed away to himself. "I'm not sure I'll ask for you on your next Grade S Assignment."

A titanic blast of the coach horn was Dumpton's answer to that. "We're here," he called unnecessarily. The vis-a-vis rattled clinking in under an impressive arched gateway and at once the coolness and quiet of a great palace closed about them. In a real sense this was like coming home to Larrabee for his own palace had been closed these last six years whilst he was away on digs.

Graybrook received them in his study, a many-windowed room set half-way up an octagonal tower on the south-east wall.

The interview was inevitably going to be awkward, that much Larrabee had clearly foreseen; what he had not grasped was the cold blackness of the hate that flowed out of Graybrook. The noble stood clad all in midnight black, ashen faced, dark of eye and pinched of nose. At his side his great sword of nobility hung until the scabbard tip brushed the floor. During the entire interview his left hand did not leave the hilt of that sword.

"I have come," Professor Higham was saying smoothly, "because I have placed my house and property at the bidding of Larrabee. He has only this morning been discharged from Central Hospital where the wound received at the hands of the Gurone—"

"I had heard of that encounter," Graybrook said. "What did Larrabee wish to see me about?"

The grim man standing blackly before them was the first



man in Rathvane to mention Larrabee's fight with the Gurone without an admiring superlative. It was in character.

Larrabee stepped forward. "I wanted to tell you about Fay," he began. "I wish you to know—"

"What I know I already know. Anything you may say can alter that not at all. Not at all. You understand."

"May I say that I am sorry—that I wish—"

"Sorrow and wishing will not bring back Fay. Now please excuse me. I am awaited at a meeting."

Professor Higham touched Larrabee on the elbow. "As you wish, Graybrook. I will, however, say this. I know Larrabee better than you do. Your daughter trusted him implicitly. She would not have blamed him for what happened."

Graybrook did not break into an impassioned diatribe; he merely mentioned key-words like 'blasphemer,' 'plunderer of the Great One's rest,' 'impious sorcerers,' 'devils without conscience,' and lastly 'meddlers in the black arts.'

During it Higham bowed politely and he and Larrabee took their leave. Graybrook's last words, shouted in a steely voice of hate, were: "And do not think that we are not aware of your foul work, Professor Higham. Cease before it is too late—"

Then Higham and Larrabee were out in the ante room and descending the octagonal tower in the steam lift. In the courtyard Dumpton held the greys. The vis-a-vis clattered out under the ancient archway and re-entered the bright sunshine of day.

"Whew!" said Larrabee. "Domrin warned me. But . . .!"

"A meeting," mused Higham, fisting his chin. "Most interesting. Graybrook is a hereditary Councilman; but there is no council meeting scheduled for today. I wonder—and certainly he said no more than he meant."

"He sounded like a half-crazy Conclaver to me."

"Precisely. I'd always regarded him askance and now that his daughter has been—ah—lost, that may have been the final tumbler to tilt him into the Conclave's arms."

"You mean that Graybrook is a—"

"I think it most likely. Of one thing we can be sure. He is fanatically anti-science. And such men are dangerous. Most interesting, most interesting." The carriage clopped down a winding ramp, heading out for Higham's villa. "By Steam! A most interesting development. The noble Graybrook a member of the Conclave. This will bear watching."



## five

The wooden-vaulted stable was odorous with the tang of horses, the sweet stink of dung, the rich smells of leather harness, the penetrating scent of metal polishes, of human sweat and sun-dried dust. Larrabee, noble of Rathvane, Wing Colonel of the Air Service, archaeologist, scientist, poet and potential Councillor, scraped dung methodically with his broom and brush. He worked with a will, not caring that his grey clothing was dirty and smeared, anxious only that he should finish his manual labour and clean the stables to a pristine polish before the next shift reported in.

He had toyed with the idea of entering the cavalry ; but in the end his love of airships had swamped his love of horses. He was a volunteer Air Service Wing Colonel and if the Gurone persisted in their attacks all his other assignments would have to go by the board to allow him to soldier full time. Thinking back to that epic fight with the Opteradent mounted Gurone he was not altogether displeased.

Mucking out horses was an occupation he took as a mere detail of his Grade M Assignment. M for Manual. If the truth was allowed, he preferred it to Grade S—S for Service. And with the wound an allowable excuse he had saved a week and was still on light duties. In another week's time he could either take up another Assignment and thus get them all over with for the year, or go back to his beloved dig and see what Torrence had been up to.

Young Slater ran whooping through the door, kicking over a bucket, shouting. He waved a newspaper.

"Take it easy, young feller—" said Larrabee, laughing.

"Here. Look at this !" Slater was in a lather.

Larrabee took the paper and read the news item. Gurone. Gurone had been authoritatively reported as completely defeating the armies and air services of Travanslay. They were massing for a final onslaught on Travanslay City itself. After that, after that an infant would know where the swarming hosts would march. Rathvane. Rathvane the golden.

He crunched the paper in a griping fist. "Damn the Gurone! This means that—" He remembered Slater and bit off his words. He had to see Professor Higham.

Other manual workers in the stables looked up and crowded around. Angry growls arose. The thought of another race



of intelligent beings who were not men arising on the Earth had the power to raise hackles, create dread, set all men's primitive reactions into full spate. Overtures of friendship had been contemptuously spurned by the Gurone. They, too, had no time for any race other than their own. Perhaps they felt that the time for man was over and done with, that men should gracefully sink into extinction—or, if they refused, then be thrust bloodily and in agony into final dissolution.

Leaving the stables for the day when the new shift reported in Larrabee was caught in a sudden torrential summer storm. He dodged quickly off the street and into Professor Higham's villa doorway, shaking the water from his light summer clothing. Like any other man he wore simple clothes when on Assignment of manual labour, having left his dirty grey overalls hung up in the stables.

Thunder bellowed as Dumpton let him in. He went quickly up to the professor's laboratory and, knocking, went straight in.

For a moment he thought that the storm outside had forced its way into this stone-flagged, wide room. A blue flicker of lightning played beyond the windows—or was it streaming from the end of the laboratory, where shadows rushed away from the professor's dark figure? A stuttering clamour filled the room with sound. Again thunder roared outside and when the lightning struck like a sword across the windows, that crackling blue flame down there at the far end of the room had remained in being throughout the long pause.

Higham turned, saw him and smiled. He made a small movement and the blue chained lightning died. He advanced on Larrabee, chuckling.

"You look as though you've been a Conclaver all your life."

"I'm sorry, professor. But—what was that? Did I—?"

"No—you weren't dreaming, boy. Nor were you seeing sorceries and ghouls raised from the dead. Here, come."

Higham drew Larrabee towards the apparatus filling the entire end of the room. Here a bench was covered with row after row of jars, connected by wires. Various instruments the use of which Larrabee hadn't the faintest conception lay scattered everywhere. Outside the laboratory thunder rolled after the lightning's dazzle. The storm was almost overhead,



the stroke of fire followed almost at once by the crashing thunder.

The professor's old head cocked towards the window. "Out there," he said, waving to the storm. "That is where the power lies ! If we could only harness and bridle the stroke of lightning, channel it, direct it, turn it on the Gurone— !"

Amazed awe caught Larrabee. Had all his researches into the forbidden turned Higham's head ? Was there truth after all in the warnings of the Conclave and should man never meddle with the dark forces of the unknown ?

A brief laugh broke from the professor. "Don't look at me like that, boy ! I knew your father when he was your age—aye, and I was, too—and he looked like that when I preferred to work in my laboratory rather than go hunting on an airship safari. Ah, me, great days, great days. And all dead now. As dead as we all shall be if we do not find some way to beat these damned Gurone, and that quickly."

"What, exactly, are you doing ?"

"Ah ! If I knew that, now, I'd be a happier man." Higham moved his hand again over the instruments. Larrabee jumped back. From two copper studs a blue spark, fat and sizzling, had jumped like baby lightning bouncing on the knees of its mighty parents in the sky.

"By the Great Ones !" said Larrabee. "You create the lightning !"

"No, my boy. This is lightning ; but lightning that runs in curious ways." Leprous shadows crouched in the wide room, leering from cornice and ceiling, seeming only waiting to pounce on the men below. Rain shattered against the windows. The gas flames wavered in their glass shades. Wind caught and buffeted the villa, shaking doors and windows in their frames. "Come, Larry, enough of this. You have returned from assignment and are hungry, weary—"

"Not yet, professor. Tell me, what useful purpose does your experiment serve ?"

Higham spread his arms. "Should research into the unknown then always serve an end ? Should not we be allowed to discover strange facts for the sake and the beauty of those facts alone ?"

"I don't know about that. You hold the chair of applied steam mathematics at Rathvane University. Of all men you



should be the one to answer your own question. As for me—give me science that can help me to fight the Gurone—”

“And uncover the secrets of the past?” slipped in Higham, slyly.

“Why, yes. Yes, that, too. But now, in this supreme moment of danger for Rathvane, with the Gurone at our doors—”

“Oh?”

Professor Higham had not read the paper. When Larrabee had told him his expression changed; the laugh lines turned downwards into sour creases of weariness and despair.

“So close, so soon. Ah, me, boy, my life will not be long enough to finish my work. I shall die beneath some bestial spear or sword and who, then, will have the brains, the daring, the imagination to carry on where I have left off?”

Larrabee could not help chuckle. “That’s more like my old ego-proven professor,” he said.

“Look now, watch this.” Higham played with the brass studs on the bench. A thick iron bar suddenly shot forward without human hand to impel, struck ringing against a reel of copper wire.

“I’ve seen a similar thing with a magnet,” Larrabee said.

“A magnet, yes. But have you seen a magnet like this?”

“No.” Then Larrabee saw the whole in focus. He waved a hand pettishly over the bench. “But of what use is all this playing with clever toys? These sparks of chained lightning, this movement of iron rods? How can this help to beat back the onslaught of the Gurone?”

“Just now I cannot answer that question. You are like all impatient young men, demanding the airship before the helium. But I intend to return with you to your horrible diggings in the Demming Desert. I think—I hope—maybe we might open that accursed screwlock and find where your girl and your comrades have gone.”

The dinner had been excellent and the dinner party congenial. After the meal the guests, in common with most of Rathvane’s population, carried on the party atmosphere and wandered from room to room, not being tied to any one chamber in which they could enjoy themselves. Although, Larrabee couldn’t help thinking, not many in Rathvane this



night felt like parties. The storm had muttered itself to sleep and now the stars had crept back into the sky.

Standing on the glassed-in roof of a turret in the south-east angle of Councillor Mordun's palace, Larrabee reflected on his host's fine dinner, the eagerness with which Professor Higham had brought him to this dinner party at Mordun's and on the shades of importance-within-the-city of the men here tonight. Climbing on to the glass roof had taken him away from the gaiety for a moment's reflection.

Only too well Larrabee knew he could have no rest, no peace of mind until he was finally assured that he had done everything possible to—hardly prevent—but to mitigate the accident. Graybrook scorned him; would undoubtedly seek to destroy him, not recking that that would not bring back his daughter. His daughter . . . Fay . . .

Larrabee turned back from the roof, hating himself, knowing a depth of agony that no man should experience. He had received word that he might report for duty with his Air Squadron as soon as maybe—if not quicker. Yet he had sent back answer that he, as a volunteer, exercised his right to stay out of the battle until general decree called all volunteers to the colours. He could not blithely go off to battle against the Gurone and leave that mystery of the screw and the tunnel and the disappearance of three friends unsolved—particularly now that Higham had held out a hope of unscrewing once again that devilish stopper.

"What, Larry! All alone and brooding!"

He turned with a forced smile that barely stirred his thinned lips.

"I but studied the stars, Fiona."

Fiona Mordun laughed with a silver tinkle that had the same effect as ice-water on Larrabee. As Councillor Mordun's daughter and hostess this night she was filled with pride and high colour, the consciousness of living in dangerous times and of living at the centre of events set a sparkle in her eyes, an edge to her speech.

And also, as Higham had slyly hinted, she had made up her mind about Larrabee.

"Point out to me the North Star, Larry."

That was an old game of childhood. He looked up. "There, Fiona. See, take the Northern Sword—those six stars in the shape of a cross with one arm longer than the others—



run your eye down the blade and the North Star is that powerful star—there—see—” They had drifted close as Larrabee followed the old navigators’ directions for discovering the North Star and Fiona in looking along his pointing arm was very close to him. He was aware of her perfume. Softness pressed against his arm. He could feel her breathing, deeply, unsteadily.

She was a beautiful woman, tall and graceful, with flowing black hair, sheened with midnight star-glitter like the heavens above ; but she was not for him. The sudden shocked clarity of understanding hit him then ; Fiona Mordun was his for the asking, the taking, there on that glass floor under a night sky over old Rathvane.

And Fay had been drawn into the depths of the earth by a screw that had lain waiting for two hundred million years.

The wrench was as powerful as that magnetic attraction Higham had demonstrated in his laboratory. Larrabee drew back, feeling the sweat chilling on his forehead, the tremble in his hands. “I think we should rejoin your father’s guests, Fiona. It is—”

“Very well, Larry.” She had turned from him, her face hidden, and her scramble down the short ladder to the steam lift was almost—almost but inevitably not quite—ungraceful.

## s i x

When at last Professor Higham and Councillor Mordun had manoeuvred the men they required into Mordun’s study and the door had been locked the dinner party was still going strong and only a few of the women wondered where certain men had disappeared. Occasionally strains of music wafted into the study. They formed a strange counterpoint to the business on hand.

“Well, gentlemen,” Mordun began briskly. “You have all been invited here for one reason alone—and I do not believe I need elaborate on that.”

The gathering—there were about a dozen men there—nodded. They understood well enough that they represented men of science and understanding and of action, men who would be the first to be struck down if the Conclave moved into the open. Larrabee had been used to these meetings as a youngster ; his father had rumbled : “Young Larry’s got to learn in a hurry that this world isn’t all honey and roses.”



The very atmosphere of cloak and dagger but emphasised the stark facts. Each man here tonight knew that his life was forfeit if the Conclave had word of their talk ; the laws of Rathvane with the preponderance of weight wielded by the Conclave had little mercy on blasphemers.

Higham recounted the meeting with Graybrook. Mordun said : " So Graybrook is against us. A pity. He is a great man, a man of influence—"

" The Gurone are more powerful," interrupted Domrin. He was dressed foppishly and the bright silks contrasted oddly with his miner's frame. " Graybrook may come to his senses if his daughter is found."

Larrabee was astonished. " But," he said, hating the words, hating himself. " She has been gone so long in the earth that she cannot be alive—"

Domrin and Higham exchanged glances. Larrabee was puzzled. A heavy pulse beat in his throat. What mischief was afoot that he did not know ?

Against the tall windows long crimson curtains had been drawn and the gas flames burned still in their glass shades. The men were sitting casually in deep armchairs, drinks at their elbows, one or two chewing the yellow-berry, a habit Larrabee had never contracted. The air was like some friendly chat ; but the subject matter bore the gravest importance to the future of Rathvane, and through Rathvane the future of mankind on the Earth.

Councillor Mordun went to a table over which a cloth had been thrown. He returned holding a stick between his hands.

" The papers today have been full of the fall of Travanslay," he began. " We had observers with the Travanslay forces and they reported to me yesterday." As War Minister, Councillor Mordun could expect to be kept informed of what went on in neighbouring kingdoms. His hearers bent closer sensing the reason for this night-time meeting under cover of a dinner party. " The Gurone have developed a new and powerful weapon. With it they completely routed the Air Service of Travanslay, and we know that that service was efficient and brave and well equipped. Perhaps not as good as the Air Service of Rathvane, but—to be so utterly shattered indicates all too clearly that the new weapon of the Gurone is of terrifying effectiveness."



He placed the stick on a low table in the centre of the ring of armchairs. Faces bent bleakly above it.

"I do not know how this thing works. That is what Professor Higham and our leading scientists have to work on. But the results were that the Gurone were able to shoot iron and leaden pellets at the Travanslay from a distance far out of range of bow or steam-peltas."

Larrabee said simply : " There is a puff of smoke. The next thing you know is the missile has crashed into your bag."

"The Gurone with whom you had that great fight had these?"

"Yes, Councillor. Although all I saw was the puff of smoke and the result. I've no idea how the things work."

There was a growl around the room. These men were well aware of the dangers before them. Professor Higham picked up the stick.

"This is a tube of metal, closed at one end. There is a wooden stock there, presumably to hold the thing with. There is also a small hole at the base of the metal tube, a hole that shows clear signs of burning. The tube itself is pitted, as though flame had licked it. Where there's smoke there's fire, eh, Larry?"

"But how could fire propel iron pellets?"

Mordun tossed down a cloth belt with rows of pouches, each containing four leaden balls, an inch in diameter. "These are the projectiles. I did not believe this; but I was told that they can penetrate armour that a good steam-peltas bolt bounces from."

"By the Great Ones!" said old Francis, from his chair.

"We need to operate the steam-cannon against the Gurone if they have this devil's tool," rumbled Domrin.

"Hear, hear," came from one or two.

"The Conclave would never allow it," pointed out Mordun.

"The Conclave," said Larrabee, "need to be frightened."

"Ah!" said Mordun. "Yes. But how?"

"Have they seen these new Gurone weapons?"

"A sample was taken to the Conclave Chapter Hall to-night."

"Those damned blinkered, donkey-headed nitwits!" fumed Higham. "They'll sit on their rumps while the Gurone blast all human beings off the face of the Earth."



"But have you forgotten," put in Councillor Soames from his armchair where he sat erect, white-haired and fiery-eyed. "The steam-cannon may broil everything in its path ; but it does not even outrange an arrow."

"That's true," came the affirmative growl from the men clustered about the Gurone-thing. "The steam-cannon is first-class for close work, clearing a front, breaking a line ; but," asked old Francis, "but how can our Air Service operate if their bags are to be punctured at long range ?"

"By the Great Ones !" said Mordun angry. "We are now busily tearing down our own weapon which a moment ago we were planning to prise from the clutch of the Conclave."

"Between them", Domrin said drily, "the Conclave and the Gurone addle men's brains."

Councillor Soames said : "Let us not forget that the Conclave, although misguided, sunk in superstitious fears, hating and reactionary, are still men. The Gurone are—the Gurone."

"Damn them to hell," someone said darkly from the ring of armchairs.

Larrabee had the itchy feeling, an impression that shamed him to acknowledge, that this conference would end with nothing being done, nothing settled, as so many of these secret talks among the free thinkers had ended before. Even if the Conclave could be frightened into allowing freer use of steam weapons and intensified research into new ideas, there was nothing in the armoury of Rathvane to match these—these fire-cannon. Using fire to throw a peltas bolt ! Incredible. Matching that thought, Higham was speaking.

"We know—or think we know—that fire and smoke do not possess the expansive power of steam. What does ? How can a puff of smoke propel a leaden bolt ?"

Councillor Mordun hunched forward and, on a breath, Larrabee recognised that his weary and cynical reading of this midnight meeting as just another cloak-and-dagger drama without force or meaning was wrong. He sensed before Mordun spoke how incredibly wrong he had been ; how he had misjudged these men and the hour in the affairs of Golden Rathvane.

"I told you that my observers reported to me from Travanslay yesterday." Mordun's head jutted forward as he spoke and the tall gas flames in their glass shades reflected from his



eyes so that his eyeballs blazed with a fierce dedicated fire in the shadowed room. "They brought more than just bad news and information of dead dreams. They brought out of the shattered domain of Travanslay the hope that we might grasp the key to victory. Their escape was hurried, in the nature of things it was a wild adventure. They were lucky to reach Rathvane alive . . ."

"The key, Mordun, the key?" said Professor Higham for them all.

Mordun chuckled harshly. "The Fortress of Dunluce."

"Dunluce!" said Domrin. "Travanslay Ordnance have an Armoury and Foundry there. High class work . . ."

"Had, my dear Domrin," pointed out Mordun. "Had."

The cackle from old Francis held no humour. "And now, I suppose, the damned Gurone have taken everything over . . ."

"Precisely." Mordun's craggy face held all their attention now and they listened as men listened when the drums beat the execution roll. "The Gurone took over. They evicted the men of Travanslay and turned Dunluce over for their own war production. From that old castle now pours a growing stream of these fire-weapons. But—" He gripped one strong fist into the other and turned his wrists as though unlocking a massive and rusty key. "Now we can strike! For we have a complete plan of the fortifications stored in our Intelligence Archives."

For Larrabee the trumpet call rang clear and compelling. No longer need there be frustration, a punching of misty nothings, a gnawing disease of uncertainty.

He said: "May I be allowed to volunteer to go with the raiding party?"

The reaction to that surprised him. Mordun leaned back, both snapping one thread of suspense and yet creating in its train another of more sinister design. "Go with them, Larrabee! You have been asked here tonight to be offered the chief place. We ask you to lead the men of Rathvane who seek to steal away the secret of the Gurone fire-weapon from the Fortress of Dunluce. How say you?"

Of thought there was no need.

"Thank you," Larrabee said. And sat back, silent and with a brain filled with colliding thoughts.

Preliminary details were quickly settled. The party would use three air battleships and they must remember at all times



that they acted without the knowledge of the Conclave. What they sought to do would draw down the blackest anger from that body of reactionary peddlers of the black arts. Ludicrous though it might be, they had to operate for the ultimate good of Rathvane in secrecy and darkness.

"We seek," Professor Higham said sombrely, "to know how the Gurone propel a leaden bolt with fire and smoke. They have discovered this secret through science—and all we are able to do is steal it from them!"

Domrin breathed in, expanding his magnificent chest. "You know," he said on the exhalation, "it makes you wonder if one man ought to spend his entire life working at just one task. I remember I always felt constricted and annoyed at the waste of time when I had to leave my mines and factories for an Assignment."

"That would be evidence enough to have you condemned out of hand by the Conclave," Mordun said mildly, spent now after that burst of fanatical talk. "But I know what you mean. I, too, have experienced irritation in having to leave work I enjoyed for an Assignment. Oh, it is necessary, make no mistake about that. Everyone must take a turn in seeing to the dirty jobs. Civilisation would break down if we did not. But—yes, if one man spent a lifetime seeking for the reason why smoke and fire propelled a ball of lead—"

"The Gurone, I'm told," Larrabee said flatly, "use such a system."

The silence was embarrassing.

Then—"Great Ones dammit to hell!" Professor Higham rose, shaking. "Are we to sit trembling, thinking that perhaps the Gurone *do* have the right to the Earth and that the days of men are numbered! We are men! We shall find a way to meet the Gurone and all their devilish inventions and to beat them every one!"

The assenting growl that ran around the room this time was ugly and passionate and charged with a desperate resolve.

To Mankind the Earth and the fruits thereof. And let the thieving Gurone be broiled by steam-cannon to everlasting damnation.

To be concluded



*This latest short story of Jim Ballard's fits into the category of city-growth created in his earlier "Manhole 69," "Build-Up" and "Escapement." If the world is overcrowded now, try and visualise it as Ballard sees it here.*

# BILLENIU

by J. G. BALLARD

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All day long, and often into the early hours of the morning, the tramp of feet sounded up and down the stairs outside Ward's cubicle. Built into a narrow alcove in a bend of the staircase between the fourth and fifth floors, its plywood walls flexed and creaked with every footstep like the timbers of a rotting windmill. Over a hundred people lived in the top three floors of the old rooming house, and sometimes Ward would lie awake on his narrow bunk until 2 or 3 a.m., mechanically counting the last residents returning from the all-night movies in the stadium half a mile away. Through the window he could hear giant fragments of the amplified dialogue booming among the rooftops. The stadium was never empty. During the day the huge four-sided screen was raised on its davit and athletics meetings or football matches ran continuously. For the people in the houses abutting the stadium the noise must have been unbearable.

Ward, at least, had a certain degree of privacy. Two months earlier, before he came to live on the staircase, he had shared a room with seven others on the ground floor of a house in 755th Street, and the ceaseless press of people jostling past the window had reduced him to a state of chronic exhaustion. The street was always full, an endless clamour of voices and



shuffling feet. By 6-30, when he woke, hurrying to take his place in the bathroom queue, the crowds already jammed it from sidewalk to sidewalk, the din punctuated every half minute by the roar of the elevated trains running over the shops on the opposite side of the road. As soon as he saw the advertisement describing the staircase cubicle he had left (like everyone else, he spent most of his spare time scanning the classifieds in the newspapers, moving his lodgings an average of once every two months) despite the higher rental. A cubicle on a staircase would almost certainly be on its own.

However, this had its drawbacks. Most evenings his friends from the library would call in, eager to rest their elbows after the bruising crush of the public reading room. The cubicle was slightly more than four and a half square metres in floor area, half a square metre over the statutory maximum for a single person, the carpenters having taken advantage, illegally of a recess beside a nearby chimney breast. Consequently Ward had been able to fit a small straight-backed chair into the interval between the bed and the door, so that only one person at a time needed to sit on the bed—in most single cubicles host and guest had to sit side by side on the bed, conversing over their shoulders and changing places periodically to avoid neck-strain.

"You were lucky to find this place," Rossiter, the most regular visitor, never tired of telling him. He reclined back on the bed, gesturing at the cubicle. "It's enormous, the perspectives really zoom. I'd be surprised if you hadn't got at least five metres here, perhaps even six."

Ward shook his head categorically. Rossiter was his closest friend, but the quest for living space had forged powerful reflexes. "Just over four and a half, I've measured it carefully. There's no doubt about it."

Rossiter lifted one eyebrow. "I'm amazed. It must be the ceiling then."

Manipulating the ceiling was a favourite trick of unscrupulous landlords—most assessments of area were made upon the ceiling, out of convenience, and by tilting back the plywood partitions the rated area of a cubicle could be either increased, for the benefit of a prospective tenant (many married couples were thus bamboozled into taking a single cubicle), or decreased temporarily on the visits of the housing inspectors. Ceilings were criss-crossed with pencil marks staking out the



rival claims of tenants on opposite sides of a party wall. Someone timid of his rights could be literally squeezed out of existence—in fact, the advertisement ‘quiet clientele’ was usually a tacit invitation to this sort of piracy.

“The wall does tilt a little,” Ward admitted. “Actually, it’s about four degrees out—I used a plumb-line. But there’s still plenty of room on the stairs for people to get by.”

Rossiter grinned. “Of course, John. I’m just envious, that’s all. My room’s driving me crazy.” Like everyone, he used the term ‘room’ to describe his tiny cubicle, a hangover from the days fifty years earlier when people had indeed lived one to a room, sometimes, unbelievably, one to an apartment or house. The micro-films in the architecture catalogues at the library showed scenes of museums, concert halls and other public buildings in what appeared to be everyday settings, often virtually empty, two or three people wandering down an enormous gallery or staircase. Traffic moved freely along the centre of streets, and in the quieter districts sections of sidewalk would be deserted for fifty yards or more.

Now, of course, the older buildings had been torn down and replaced by housing batteries, or converted into apartment blocks. The great banquetting room in the former City Hall had been split horizontally into four decks, each of these cut up into hundreds of cubicles.

As for the streets, traffic had long since ceased to move about them. Apart from a few hours before dawn when only the sidewalks were crowded, every thoroughfare was always packed with a shuffling mob of pedestrians, perforce ignoring the countless ‘Keep Left’ signs suspended over their heads, wrestling past each other on their way to home and office, their clothes dusty and shapeless. Often ‘locks’ would occur when a huge crowd at a street junction became immovably jammed. Sometimes these locks would last for days. Two years earlier Ward had been caught in one outside the stadium, for over forty-eight hours was trapped in a gigantic pedestrian jam containing over 20,000 people, fed by the crowds leaving the stadium on one side and those approaching it on the other. An entire square mile of the local neighbourhood had been paralysed, and he vividly remembered the nightmare of swaying helplessly on his feet as the jam shifted and heaved, terrified of losing his balance and being trampled underfoot. When the police had finally sealed off the stadium and dispersed the jam



he had gone back to his cubicle and slept for a week, his body blue with bruises.

"I hear they may reduce the allocation to three and a half metres," Rossiter remarked.

Ward paused to allow a party of tenants from the sixth floor to pass down the staircase, holding the door to prevent it jumping off its latch. "So they're always saying," he commented. "I can remember that rumour ten years ago."

"It's no rumour," Rossiter warned him. "It may well be necessary soon. Thirty million people are packed into this city now, a million increase in just one year. There's been some pretty serious talk at the Housing Department."

Ward shook his head. "A drastic revaluation like that is almost impossible to carry out. Every single partition would have to be dismantled and nailed up again, the administrative job alone is so vast it's difficult to visualise. Millions of cubicles to be redesigned and certified, licences to be issued, plus the complete resettlement of every tenant. Most of the buildings put up since the last revaluation are designed around a four-metre modulus—you can't simply take half a metre off the end of each cubicle and then say that makes so many new cubicles. They may be only six inches wide." He laughed. "Besides, how can you live in just three and a half metres?"

Rossiter smiled. "That's the ultimate argument, isn't it? They used it twenty-five years ago at the last revaluation, when the minimum was cut from five to four. It couldn't be done they all said, no-one could stand living in only four square metres, it was enough room for a bed and suitcase, but you couldn't open the door to get in." Rossiter chuckled softly. "They were all wrong. It was merely decided that from then on all doors would open outwards. Four square metres was here to stay."

Ward looked at his watch. It was 7-30. "Time to eat. Let's see if we can get into the food-bar across the road."

Grumbling at the prospect, Rossiter pulled himself off the bed. They left the cubicle and made their way down the staircase. This was crammed with luggage and packing cases so that only a narrow interval remained around the bannister. On the floors below the congestion was worse. Corridors were wide enough to be chopped up into single cubicles, and the air was stale and dead, cardboard walls hung with damp laundry and makeshift larders. Each of the five rooms on the floors



contained a dozen tenants, their voices reverberating through the partitions.

People were sitting on the steps above the second floor, using the staircase as an informal lounge, although this was against the fire regulations, women chatting with the men queuing in their shirtsleeves outside the washroom, children diving around them. By the time they reached the entrance Ward and Rossiter were having to force their way through the tenants packed together on every landing, loitering around the notice boards or pushing in from the street below.

Taking a breath at the top of the steps, Ward pointed to the food-bar on the other side of the road. It was only thirty yards away, but the throng moving down the street swept past like a river at full tide, crossing them from right to left. The first picture show at the stadium started at 9 o'clock, and people were setting off already to make sure of getting in.

"Can't we go somewhere else?" Rossiter asked, screwing his face up at the prospect of the food-bar. Not only was it packed and take them half an hour to be served, but the food was flat and unappetising. The journey from the library four blocks away had given him an appetite.

Ward shrugged. "There's a place on the corner, but I doubt if we can make it." This was two hundred yards upstream; they would be fighting the crowd all the way.

"Maybe you're right." Rossiter put his hand on Ward's shoulder. "You know, John, your trouble is that you never go anywhere, you're too disengaged, you just don't realise how bad everything is getting."

Ward nodded. Rossiter was right. In the morning, when he set off for the library, the pedestrian traffic was moving with him towards the down-town offices; in the evening, when he came back, it was flowing in the opposite direction. By and large he never altered his routine. Brought up from the age of ten in a municipal hostel, he had gradually lost touch with his father and mother, who lived on the east side of the city and had been unable, or unwilling, to make the journey to see him. Having surrendered his initiative to the dynamics of the city he was reluctant to try to win it back merely for a better cup of coffee. Fortunately his job at the library brought him into contact with a wide range of young people of similar interests. Sooner or later he would marry, find a double cubicle near the library and settle down. If they had enough children (three was



the required minimum) they might even one day own a small room of their own.

They stepped out into the pedestrian stream, carried along by it for ten or twenty yards, then quickened their pace and side-stepped through the crowd, slowly tacking across to the other side of the road. There they found the shelter of the shop-fronts, slowly worked their way back to the food-bar, shoulders braced against the countless minor collisions.

"What are the latest population estimates?" Ward asked as they circled a cigarette kiosk, stepping forward whenever a gap presented itself.

Rossiter smiled. "Sorry, John, I'd like to tell you but you might start a stampede. Besides, you wouldn't believe me."

Rossiter worked in the Insurance Department at the City Hall, had informal access to the census statistics. For the last ten years these had been classified information, partly because they were felt to be inaccurate, but chiefly because it was feared they might set off a mass attack of claustrophobia. Minor outbreaks had taken place already, and the official line was that world population had reached a plateau, levelling off at 20,000 million. No-one believed this for a moment, and Ward assumed that the 3% annual increase maintained since the 1960's was continuing.

How long it could continue was impossible to estimate. Despite the gloomiest prophecies of the Neo-Malthusians, world agriculture had managed to keep pace with the population growth, although intensive cultivation meant that 95% of the population was permanently trapped in vast urban conurbations. The outward growth of cities had at last been checked; in fact, all over the world former suburban areas were being reclaimed for agriculture and population additions were confined within the existing urban ghettos. The countryside, as such, no longer existed. Every single square foot of ground sprouted a crop of one type or other. The one-time fields and meadows of the world were now, in effect, factory floors, as highly mechanised and closed to the public as any industrial area. Economic and ideological rivalries had long since faded before one over-riding quest—the internal colonisation of the city.

Reaching the food-bar, they pushed themselves into the entrance and joined the scrum of customers pressing six deep against the counter.



"What is really wrong with the population problem," Ward confided to Rossiter, "is that no-one has ever tried to tackle it. Fifty years ago short-sighted nationalism and industrial expansion put a premium on a rising population curve, and even now the hidden incentive is to have a large family so that you can gain a little privacy. Single people are penalised simply because there are more of them and they don't fit conveniently into double or triple cubicles. But it's the large family with its compact, space-saving logistic that is the real villain."

Rossiter nodded, edging nearer the counter, ready to shout his order. "Too true. We all look forward to getting married just so that we can have our six square metres."

Directly in front of them, two girls turned around and smiled. "Six square metres," one of them, a dark-haired girl with a pretty oval face, repeated. "You sound like the sort of young man I ought to get to know. Going into the real estate business, Peter?"

Rossiter grinned and squeezed her arm. "Hello, Judith. I'm thinking about it actively. Like to join me in a private venture?"

The girl leaned against him as they reached the counter. "Well, I might. It would have to be legal, though."

The other girl, Helen Waring, an assistant at the library, pulled Ward's sleeve. "Have you heard the latest, John? Judith and I have been kicked out of our room. We're on the street right at this minute."

"What?" Rossiter cried. They collected their soups and coffee and edged back to the rear of the bar. "What on earth happened?"

Helen explained: "You know that little broom cupboard outside our cubicle? Judith and I have been using it as a sort of study hole, going in there to read. It's quiet and restful, if you can get used to not breathing. Well, the old girl found out and kicked up a big fuss, said we were breaking the law and so on. In short, out." Helen paused. "Now we've heard she's going to let it as a single."

Rossiter pounded the counter ledge. "A broom cupboard? Someone's going to live there? But she'll never get a licence."

Judith shook her head. "She's got it already. Her brother works in the Housing Department."

Ward laughed into his soup. "But how can she let it? No-one will live in a broom cupboard."



Judith stared at him sombrely. "You really believe that, John?"

Ward dropped his spoon. "No, I guess you're right. People will live anywhere. God, I don't know who I feel more sorry for—you two, or the poor devil who'll be living in that cupboard. What are you going to do?"

"A couple in a place two blocks west are sub-letting half their cubicle to us. They've hung a sheet down the middle and Helen and I'll take turns sleeping on a camp bed. I'm not joking, our room's about two feet wide. I said to Helen that we ought to split up again and sublet one half at twice our rent."

They had a good laugh over all this and then Ward said goodnight to the others and went back to his rooming house.

There he found himself with similar problems.

The manager leaned against the flimsy door, a damp cigar butt revolving around his mouth, an expression of morose boredom on his unshaven face.

"You got four point seven two metres," he told Ward, who was standing out on the staircase, unable to get into his room. Other tenants milled, passed on to the landing, where two women in curlers and dressing gowns were arguing with each other, tugging angrily at the wall of trunks and cases. Occasionally the manager glanced at them irritably. "Four seven two. I worked it out twice." He said this as if it ended all possibility of argument.

"Ceiling or floor?" Ward asked.

"Ceiling, whaddya think? How can I measure the floor with all this junk?" He kicked at a crate of books protruding from under the bed.

Ward let this pass. "There's quite a tilt on the wall," he pointed out. "As much as three or four degrees."

The manager nodded vaguely. "You're definitely over the four. Way over." He turned to Ward, who had moved down several steps to allow a man and woman to get past. "I can rent this as a double."

"What, only four and a half?" Ward said incredulously. "How?"

The man who had just passed him leaned over the manager's shoulder and sniffed at the room, taking in every detail in a one-second glance. "You renting a double here, Louie?"

The manager waved him away and then beckoned Ward into the room, closing the door after him.



"It's a nominal five," he told Ward. "New regulation, just came out. Anything over four five is a double now." He eyed Ward shrewdly. "Well, whaddya want? It's a good room, there's a lot of space here, feels more like a triple. You got access to the staircase, window slit—" He broke off as Ward slumped down on the bed and started to laugh. "Whatsa matter? Look, if you want a big room like this you gotta pay for it. I want an extra half rental or you get out."

Ward wiped his eyes, then stood up wearily and reached for the shelves. "Relax, I'm on my way. I'm going to live in a broom cupboard. 'Access to the staircase'—that's really rich. Tell me, Louie, is there life on Uranus?"

Temporarily, he and Rossiter teamed up to rent a double cubicle in a semi-derelict house a hundred yards from the library. The neighbourhood was seedy and faded, the rooming houses crammed with tenants. Most of them were owned by absentee landlords or by the city corporation, and the managers employed were of the lowest type, mere rent-collectors who cared nothing about the way their tenants divided up the living space, and never ventured beyond the first floors. Bottles and empty cans littered the corridors, and the washrooms looked like sumps. Many of the tenants were old and infirm, sitting about listlessly in their narrow cubicles, wheedling at each other back to back through the thin partitions.

Their double cubicle was on the third floor, at the end of a corridor that ringed the building. Its architecture was impossible to follow, rooms letting off at all angles, and luckily the corridor was a cul de sac. The mounds of cases ended four feet from the end wall and a partition divided off the cubicle, just wide enough for two beds. A high window overlooked the area ways of the buildings opposite.

Possessions loaded on to the shelf above his head, Ward lay back on his bed and moodily surveyed the roof of the library through the afternoon haze.

"It's not bad here," Rossiter told him, unpacking his case. "I know there's no real privacy and we'll drive each other insane within a week, but at least we haven't got six other people breathing into our ears two feet away."

The nearest cubicle, a single, was built into the banks of cases half a dozen steps along the corridor, but the occupant, a man of seventy, was deaf and bed-ridden.



"It's not bad," Ward echoed reluctantly. "Now tell me what the latest growth figures are. They might console me."

Rossiter paused, lowering his voice. "Four per cent. *Eight hundred million extra people in one year*—just less than half the earth's total population in 1950."

Ward whistled slowly. "So they will revalue. What to? Three and a half?"

"Three. From the first of next year."

"Three square metres!" Ward sat up and looked around him. "It's unbelievable! The world's going insane, Rossiter. For God's sake, when are they going to do something about it? Do you realise there soon won't be room enough to sit down, let alone lie down?"

Exasperated, he punched the wall beside him on the second blow knocked in one of the small wooden panels that had been lightly papered over.

"Hey!" Rossiter yelled. "You're breaking the place down." He dived across the bed to retrieve the panel, which hung downwards supported by a strip of paper. Ward slipped his hand into the dark interval, carefully drew the panel back on to the bed.

"Who's on the other side?" Rossiter whispered. "Did they hear?"

Ward peered through the interval, eyes searching the dim light. Suddenly he dropped the panel and seized Rossiter's shoulder, pulled him down on to the bed.

"Henry! Look!"

Rossiter freed himself and pressed his face to the opening, focussed slowly and then gasped.

Directly in front of them, faintly illuminated by a grimy skylight, was a medium-sized room, some fifteen feet square, empty except for the dust silted up against the skirting boards. The floor was bare, a few strips of frayed linoleum running across it, the walls covered with a drab floral design. Here and there patches of the paper peeled off and segments of the picture rail had rotted away, but otherwise the room was in habitable condition.

Breathing slowly, Ward closed the open door of the cubicle with his foot, then turned to Rossiter.

"Henry, do you realise what we've found? Do you realise it, man?"



"Shut up. For Pete's sake keep your voice down." Rossiter examined the room carefully. "It's fantastic. I'm trying to see whether anyone's used it recently."

"Of course they haven't," Ward pointed out. "It's obvious. There's no door into the room. We're looking through it now. They must have panelled over this door years ago and forgotten about it. Look at that filth everywhere."

Rossiter was staring into the room, his mind staggered by its vastness.

"You're right," he murmured. "Now, when do we move in?"

Panel by panel, they pried away the lower half of the door, nailed it on to a wooden frame so that the dummy section could be replaced instantly.

Then, picking an afternoon when the house was half empty and the manager asleep in his basement office, they made their first foray into the room, Ward going in alone while Rossiter kept guard in the cubicle.

For an hour they exchanged places, wandering silently around the dusty room, stretching their arms out to feel its unconfined emptiness, grasping at the sensation of absolute spatial freedom. Although smaller than many of the sub-divided rooms in which they had lived, this room seemed infinitely larger, its walls huge cliffs that soared upward to the skylight.

Finally, two or three days later, they moved in.

For the first week Rossiter slept alone in the room, Ward in the cubicle outside, both there together during the day. Gradually they smuggled in a few items of furniture: two armchairs, a table, a lamp fed from the socket in the cubicle. The furniture was heavy and victorian; the cheapest available, its size emphasised the emptiness of the room. Pride of place was taken by an enormous mahogany wardrobe, fitted with carved angels and castellated mirrors, which they were forced to dismantle and carry into the house in their suitcases. Towering over them, it reminded Ward of the micro-films of gothic cathedrals, with their massive organ lofts crossing vast naves.

After three weeks they both slept in the room, finding the cubicle unbearably cramped. An imitation japanese screen divided the room adequately and did nothing to diminish its size. Sitting there in the evenings, surrounded by his books and albums, Ward steadily forgot the city outside. Luckily he



reached the library by a back alley and avoided the crowded streets. Rossiter and himself began to seem the only real inhabitants of the world, everyone else a meaningless by-product of their own existence, a random replication of identity which had run out of control.

It was Rossiter who suggested that they ask the two girls to share the room with them.

"They've been kicked out again and may have to split up," he told Ward, obviously worried that Judith might fall into bad company. "There's always a rent freeze after a revaluation but all the landlords know about it so they're not re-letting. It's getting damned difficult to find anywhere."

Ward nodded, relaxing back around the circular red-wood table. He played with a tassel of the arsenic-green lamp shade, for a moment felt like a victorian man of letters, leading a spacious, leisurely life among overstuffed furnishings.

"I'm all for it," he agreed, indicating the empty corners. "There's plenty of room here. But we'll have to make damn sure they don't gossip about it."

After due precautions, they let the two girls into the secret, enjoying their astonishment at finding this private universe.

"We'll put a partition across the middle," Rossiter explained "then take it down each morning. You'll be able to move in within a couple of days. How do you feel?"

"Wonderful!" They goggled at the wardrobe, squinting at the endless reflections in the mirrors.

There was no difficulty getting them in and out of the house. The turnover of tenants was continuous and bills were placed in the mail rack. No-one cared who the girls were or noticed their regular calls at the cubicle.

However, half an hour after they arrived neither of them had unpacked her suitcase.

"What's up, Judith?" Ward asked, edging past the girls' beds into the narrow interval between the table and wardrobe.

Judith hesitated, looking from Ward to Rossiter, who sat on his bed, finishing off the plywood partition. "John, it's just that . . ."

Helen Waring, more matter-of-fact, took over, her fingers straightening the bed-spread. "What Judith's trying to say is that our position here is a little embarrassing. The partition is—"



Rossiter stood up. "For heaven's sake, don't worry, Helen," he assured her, speaking in the loud whisper they had all involuntarily cultivated. "No funny business, you can trust us. This partition is as solid as a rock."

The two girls nodded. "It's not that," Helen explained, "but it isn't up all the time. We thought that if an older person were here, say Judith's aunt—she wouldn't take up much room and be no trouble, she's really awfully sweet—we wouldn't need to bother about the partition—except at night," she added quickly.

Ward glanced at Rossiter, who shrugged and began to scan the floor.

"Well, it's an idea," Rossiter said. "John and I know how you feel. Why not?"

"Sure," Ward agreed. He pointed to the space between the girls' beds and the table. "One more won't make any difference."

The girls broke into whoops. Judith went over to Rossiter and kissed him on the cheek. "Sorry to be a nuisance, Henry." She smiled at him. "That's a wonderful partition you've made. You couldn't do another one for Auntie—just a little one? She's very sweet but she is getting on."

"Of course," Rossiter said. "I understand. I've got plenty of wood left over."

Ward looked at his watch. "It's seven-thirty, Judith. You'd better get in touch with your aunt. She may not be able to make it tonight."

Judith buttoned her coat. "Oh, she will," she assured Ward. "I'll be back in a jiffy."

The aunt arrived within five minutes, three heavy suitcases soundly packed.

"It's amazing," Ward remarked to Rossiter three months later. "The size of this room still staggers me. It almost gets larger everyday."

Rossiter agreed readily, averting his eyes from one of the girls changing behind the central partition. This they now left in place as dismantling it daily had become tiresome. Besides, the aunt's subsidiary partition was attached to it and she resented the continuous upsets. Ensuring she followed the entrance and exit drills through the camouflaged door and cubicle was difficult enough.



Despite this, detection seemed unlikely. The room had obviously been built as an afterthought into the central well of the house and any noise was masked by the luggage stacked in the surrounding corridor. Directly below was a small dormitory occupied by several elderly women, and Judith's aunt, who visited them socially, swore that no sounds came through the heavy ceiling. Above, the fanlight let out through a dormer window, its lights indistinguishable from the hundred other bulbs burning in the windows of the house.

Rossiter finished off the new partition he was building and held it upright, fitting it into the slots nailed to the wall between his bed and Ward's. They had agreed that this would provide a little extra privacy.

"No doubt I'll have to do one for Judith and Helen," he confided to Ward.

Ward adjusted his pillow. They had smuggled the two armchairs back to the furniture shop as they took up too much space. The bed, anyway, was more comfortable. He had never got completely used to the soft upholstery.

"Not a bad idea. What about some shelving around the wall? I've got nowhere to put anything."

The shelving tidied the room considerably, freeing large areas of the floor. Divided by their partitions, the five beds were in line along the rear wall, facing the mahogany wardrobe. In between was an open space of three or four feet, a further six feet on either side of the wardrobe.

The sight of so much spare space fascinated Ward. When Rossiter mentioned that Helen's mother was ill and badly needed personal care he immediately knew where her cubicle could be placed—at the foot of his bed, between the wardrobe and the side wall.

Helen was over-joyed. "It's awfully good of you, John," she told him, "but would you mind if Mother slept beside me? There's enough space to fit an extra bed in."

So Rossiter dismantled the partitions and moved them closer together, six beds now in line along the wall. This gave each of them an interval two and a half feet wide, just enough room to squeeze down the side of their beds. Lying back on the extreme right the shelves two feet above his head, Ward could barely see the wardrobe, but the space in front of him, a clear six feet to the wall ahead, was uninterrupted.



Then Helen's father arrived.

Knocking on the door of the cubicle, Ward smiled at Judith's aunt as she let him in. He helped her swing out the made-up bed which guarded the entrance, then rapped on the wooden panel. A moment later Helen's father, a small, grey-haired man in an undershirt, braces tied to his trousers with string, pulled back the panel.

Ward nodded to him and stepped over the luggage piled around the floor at the foot of the beds. Helen was in her mother's cubicle, helping the old woman to drink her evening broth. Rossiter, perspiring heavily, was on his knees by the mahogany wardrobe, wrenching apart the frame of the central mirror with a jemmy. Pieces of the wardrobe lay on his bed and across the floor.

"We'll have to start taking these out tomorrow," Rossiter told him. Ward waited for Helen's father to shuffle past and enter his cubicle. He had rigged up a small cardboard door, and locked it behind him with a crude hook of bent wire.

Rossiter watched him, frowning irritably. "Some people are happy. This wardrobe's a hell of a job. How did we ever decide to buy it?"

Ward sat down on his bed. The partition pressed against his knees and he could hardly move. He looked up when Rossiter was engaged and saw that the dividing line he had marked in pencil was hidden by the encroaching partition. Leaning against the wall, he tried to ease it back again, but Rossiter had apparently nailed the lower edge to the floor.

There was a sharp tap on the outside cubicle door—Judith returning from her office. Ward started to get up and then sat back. "Mr. Waring," he called softly. It was the old man's duty night.

Waring shuffled to the door of his cubicle and unlocked it fussily, clucking to himself.

"Up and down, up and down," he muttered. He stumbled over Rossiter's tool-bag and swore loudly, then added meaningly over his shoulder: "If you ask me there's too many people in here. Down below they've only got six to our seven, and it's the same size room."

Ward nodded vaguely and stretched back on his narrow bed, trying not to bang his head on the shelving. Waring was not the first to hint that he move out. Judith's aunt had made a similar suggestion two days earlier. Since he left his job at the library (the small rental he charged the others paid for the little



food he needed) he spent most of his time in the room, seeing rather more of the old man than he wanted to, but he had learned to tolerate him.

Settling himself, he noticed that the right-hand spire of the wardrobe, all he had been able to see for the past two months, was now dismantled.

It had been a beautiful piece of furniture, in a way symbolising this whole private world, and the salesman at the store told him there were few like it left. For a moment Ward felt a sudden pang of regret, as he had done as a child when his father, in a mood of exasperation, had taken something away from him and he knew he would never see it again.

Then he pulled himself together. It was a beautiful wardrobe, without doubt, but when it was gone it would make the room seem even larger.

*J. G. Ballard*

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*George Whitley has always had a penchant about Mobius strips—after reading this new story of his you may have discovered where all those intricately designed railings have been disappearing to.*

# ALL LACED UP

by GEORGE WHITLEY

---

She said, "We must get some iron lace . . ."

I looked up from the Sunday paper, regarded her. She was wearing the rather rapt expression that I have come to associate with inspiration. It becomes her—but it is an expression that I have learned almost to dread.

"Iron lace?" I asked cautiously.

"Yes. Iron lace. You know—or don't you? That ancient cast-iron railing stuff that you see around the balconies of old terrace houses . . ."

"Hearts and flowers and whatever," I amplified resignedly.

"But what for? We haven't got a balcony . . ."

"For interior decoration."

"Interior decoration?"

"A space divider."

"A space divider?"

"Don't be so dim," she told me. "This room—now that we've knocked three rooms, including the kitchen, into one—is rather long . . ."

"Like a railway carriage," I agreed. "Or a railway tunnel . . ."

"Don't be so funny!" she snapped. Then the rapt expression returned to her face. "I can see it. From the wall there,



to about two thirds of the way across. Iron lace, painted black . . .”

“And picked out in gold . . .”

She looked at me suspiciously, then relaxed. “Yes, you’re right. Just a hint of gold. A sort of . . . shadowing . . .”

I began to catch her enthusiasm. “Subtle,” I contributed.

“Yes. Subtle. But dramatic.” She scooped the Sunday paper off my lap, substituted for it the Saturday one. A slim finger indicated a classified advertisement that she had already ringed with pencil. I read the ad. It had been inserted by the owner of a junkyard, his premises being situated on the outskirts of Parramatta. He had iron lace—sandblasted and ready for installation—for sale. He was open on Sunday.

It wasn’t a bad day for a drive—a little on the chilly side, perhaps, but sunny. Swiftly and efficiently Sally piloted the Volkswagen through the city and the suburbs, out on to the Parramatta Road. I was acting as navigator, although at first the job was a sinecure. Instead of studying the road map I was able to keep a keen look-out to port and to starboard, to point out fine examples of the iron lacemaker’s art decorating the balconies of some of the old terrace houses that we passed.

And then I had to stop sight-seeing and start navigating. The junkyard was stuck away at the back of beyond, in the middle of a maze of dirt roads that nobody had yet got around to labelling. Sally was worrying about the springs of the car and I, who had given the brute its weekly wash that morning, was concerned about the paintwork and polish as we shuddered over the ruts, ploughed through the dust. But we found the place eventually. It looked like what it was. There was a ragged fence and beyond it were stacks of doors, heaps of old furniture, sad clusters of archaic baths and gas stoves. There was a neat enough fibreboard office from which, as soon as we stopped the car, the proprietor emerged.

He bade us good-day affably and asked what he could do for us. We said that we were just browsing. He left us to our own devices and, picking our gingerly way through the assorted debris, we browsed.

What was on display outside was just the rubbish. It was in a shed that we found the treasure. It was stacked high, panel after panel of the old iron lace, its delicacy of design revealed by the sandblasting, gleaming with the dull yet pleasant sheen of good cast iron.



The proprietor followed us into the shed.

"And would you be interested?" he asked.

I said that we should be interested.

Sally, fingering an intricate filagree of harps and shamrocks, asked, "How much?"

"Two pounds ten a panel, madam," he replied.

"Two pounds ten?" she flared.

"Yes," she was told firmly. "There's the cost of the sandblasting. And one coat of primer . . ."

"Too much," she said.

We turned to go.

He said, "Perhaps you might be interested in this . . ."

"No," said Sally firmly just as I said, "Perhaps."

The junkman lifted a rag of tarpaulin in a dim corner of the shed. Beneath it was a small stack of panels, of metal railing. It gleamed—but it wasn't the gleam of cast iron, neither was it that of aluminium. There was something odd about it.

"I can let you have this cheaper," said the proprietor. "A pound a panel."

"What is it?" I asked.

"Iron lace."

"It's not," said Sally.

"It looks . . . interesting," I said.

I went to the corner, lifted one of the panels. It was heavy, but not as heavy as it would have been had it been iron. The metal felt strangely warm to my fingers. I stood it on its edge, propping it against the stack and the wall, stepped back to get the full effect.

The design was intricate enough—but there were no hearts and flowers, no harps and shamrocks. It was abstract—and yet it was vaguely familiar. I tried to decide what it was that it reminded me of. There were interlocking circles—but they were more than mere circles. There was that odd twist to them . . . I got it then. Mobius Strips.

"It . . . It has something . . ." admitted Sally reluctantly.

"Most people don't like it," confessed the junkman, "but perhaps you . . ."

"I didn't say that I liked it," said Sally firmly. "Not at that price."

"Fifteen shillings?"

"Ten."

"All right. To you—twelve and six."



"What do *you* think, Peter?" she asked me.

"It's . . . It's different . . ." I told her cautiously.

"All right. We'll take six panels."

"Now?" asked the junkman with a rather strange eagerness.

"No. You said in your advertisement that you delivered. My husband will give you the address."

And that was that.

We sat in our chairs and looked at our space divider. It had taken the coating of black matt paint well enough and we had decided that its design was sufficiently dramatic to make the use of gold trimming unnecessary. Dramatic? It was that all right. It was . . . disturbing.

I said, between sips of my drink, "I had a couple of beers with Fred at lunch time today."

"Oh? What's new with him?"

"He's settling down at *The Courier*. They've got him doing features now."

"What sort of features?"

"Haunts. Poltergeists and such. *The Courier* always has been keen on the supernatural or the paranormal or whatever you care to call it."

"Anything to build up circulation among the credulous?"

"They sent him out to investigate and write up a haunted junkyard, Parramatta way . . ."

"A haunted junkyard?" she asked, with awakening interest

"Was the junkman flogging old tombstones?"

"No. The haunting was in the shed where he kept his iron lace. It appears that every morning he'd find it flung all over the place."

"What junkman was it?" she demanded sharply.

"He didn't say . . ."

"And you didn't ask. Of course."

I was startled by the expression on her face. "What's all the flap about, Sally?"

"Poltergeists," she said briefly.

"But you don't believe . . ."

"I'm an agnostic. I neither believe nor disbelieve."

"Then why . . .?"

"Why was the junkman, *our* junkman, so keen to get rid of *this* iron lace?" she said, pointing.

"But you wanted it."

"I didn't really. It was just the price."



I attempted to reason with her. "I've never heard of haunted iron lace. Besides, this stuff isn't old. The design is . . . contemporary. Modern . . ."

"Too modern," she said.

I began to get what she was driving at. That delicately wrought metal had an alien quality—but it was alien, somehow, in a temporal sense. I got up, refilled our glasses and then, when I was seated again, began to play with ideas, ludicrous ideas, hoping thereby to laugh Sally out of her disturbingly fey mood.

"I see it now," I told her. "I can visualise those panels back where they belong—in the engineroom of a ship, an interstellar ship. They're all part of the Interstellar Drive, the Space Warp. The ship must have crashed near here, and parts of her found their way into the junkyard. And even though there's no power source, there's enough residual energy for the wreckage of the Drive to try to warp Space, to try to sling us from here to Alpha Centauri in three seconds flat . . ."

She grinned. "You read too much science fiction, Peter," she told me.

"There's no such thing as too much—not if it's good stuff. And, anyhow, Interstellar Drives are far more credible than ghosts and hauntings."

"They are *not*," she stated firmly.

"They *are*," I stated more firmly.

And the resultant, quite enjoyable argument, lasted us through dinner and until bed time.

It was at three in the morning that I was awakened.

There was that odd, grating noise coming from the living room. It was too loud to be made by a mouse or a rat and, so far as we knew, there were no opossums in this inner suburb. Sally was still sleeping. She liked her sleep and hated to be disturbed. So, carefully, I slid out from between the sheets on my side of the bed, thrust my feet into my slippers, picked up my dressing gown from the chair and got into it. Somehow the thought of human intruders did not cross my mind. There was nothing in the house to tempt a burglar. All evidence to the contrary notwithstanding I was sure that I should find a 'possum in the living room. Or a family of 'possums.

I walked softly to the door, opened it.

There was moonlight coming through the front window, but its illumination was not necessary. The panels of wrought



metal were glowing with their own light—acold, blue luminescence. And they had torn themselves loose from their fastenings—that had been the noise that had disturbed me—and were moving, slowly, purposively.

I was afraid.

I was too afraid to cry out. All I could do was to stand there and watch the inanimate shockingly become animate, watch the panels slide and shift, stare as they arranged themselves into a hexagon.

And then, immediately, the whining started—thin, high, almost supersonic at first. Thin and high it was and then, as it became louder, its tone deepened, and as it deepened so the colour of the moonlight changed, became more and more ruddy until the room was filled with rose-tinted shadows.

Inside the hexagon the shadows shifted and stirred, coalesced took form.

There was a woman there.

Tall she was, breasts high and proud under the loosely fitting sweater, legs long and slim in their tight jeans. Her pale golden hair was pulled back in a pony tail. There was a glittering, complex bracelet on her left wrist and with her right hand she did something to it, made some adjustment. The humming died to a barely audible murmur. She stooped gracefully, slid one of the panels aside and stepped into the room.

"Made the scene, Dad," she announced.

I gaped at her.

"Dontcha dig, man?" she demanded.

"I do not," I managed to say.

"A square," she stated rather than asked.

"You could call me that," I admitted.

Her wide, generous mouth displayed perfect teeth as she smiled. She said, "I was told that squares were a dying race in this period. It would seem that they are not."

"Far from it," I agreed.

She smiled again. "Let me introduce myself. I am Lorn Verrill. Doctor Lorn Verrill. The Time Warp is my invention." She waved a hand airily towards the panels. "I had to send the cage back first, of course, but it was broken up before I could follow it. I have been trying to reassemble it by remote control. At last I succeeded." She stood with her hands on her hips, surveying the room. "And so this is a typical Twentieth Century pad," she remarked.

"Not so typical!" snapped a sharp female voice.



I turned, saw that Sally had come out of the bedroom. She had put on her robe, but since it was transparent rather than translucent and worn over nothing at all the effect was decorative but far from modest.

She demanded, "Peter, who is this woman?"

"Her name," I said carefully, "seems to be Lorn Verrill. *Doctor* Lorn Verrill." I babbled on. "A doctorate in physics, maybe, or philosophy . . ."

Lorn Verrill laughed pleasantly. "You assume too much, Peter. My degree is in one of the arts. D.I.D., if you must know."

I said, "But you must be a scientist. That . . . That . . ." I gestured towards the broken hexagon. "That Time Warp . . ."

"Just a flair for the higher mathematics," she said modestly.

"Then what the hell does D.I.D. stand for?" demanded Sally crossly.

"Doctor of Interior Decorating, of course, duckie," said Lorn.

Sally swore softly and then went to the bookcase that afforded stowage for all sorts of things in addition to books. She opened the bottle locker door, poured herself a stiff whisky. She strode to the nearest chair, plumped down into it, regarded us balefully over the rim of her glass.

She said, "This is rather much. This is rather too much. I am woken up at half past three in the bloody morning and I find my husband entertaining a blonde beatnik who says that she's a D.D. . . ."

"Not D.D.," I corrected her. "D.I.D."

"So you're on her side. You would be." She lowered the level of the whisky in her glass appreciably. "How do you know she's not a ghost? Or something worse? Like . . . Like a succubus . . ."

"Whoever heard of a succubus wearing jeans?" I asked reasonably enough.

"There has to be a first time for everything. Anyhow, those jeans are so tight they might as well have been painted on."

"I wore what I thought would be an appropriate costume for this century," Lorn Verrill told her stiffly.

"It could be appropriate at that," said Sally nastily.

"Your own attire," snapped the time traveller, "is hardly decent."

"This is my home," said Sally, "and I wear what I damn' well please inside these four walls. And if you don't like it—there's the door."



I decided that it was time to pour oil—or alcohol—on the troubled waters. And I wanted a drink myself. I asked our visitor, “Whisky? Rum?”

“In that rig,” suggested Sally, “a glass of thick, treacly muscat might be the shot.”

“We haven’t got any,” I said shortly. Then, “Brandy? Sherry? Port?”

“Brandy, if I may,” said Lorn Verrill politely.

I poured two generous dollops into two snifters, handed one to Lorn Verrill. I refilled Sally’s glass. I said, “Here’s mud in you’re eye,” but the two women ignored me.

“And now,” said Sally, when gullets had been wetted, “perhaps you will favour us with an explanation. It had better be a good one.”

“But it’s all so simple,” said the other. “My name is Lorn Verrill. I am a Doctor of Interior Decorating, but my hobby is the study of mathematics. I stumbled upon the principle of the Time Warp and, naturally, decided to use the device for my own professional ends . . .”

“Which are?” demanded Sally suspiciously.

“In my century there is a craze for old things. Really old. Period stuff. And I thought that I might be able to pick up such items cheaply in the Past. My Past.”

Sally is a shrewd businesswoman. She said, “And how would you pay for your purchases?”

“Barter, of course. I shall have to operate through contacts who will give me what I want in return for what I give them. And they will be able to sell the merchandise from my century.”

“What sort of merchandise?” I asked.

She extended her left hand. On her wrist, above that intricate bracelet which we now recognised as a control panel in miniature, was a beautiful watch, a piece of personal machinery that was obviously of the highest quality.

“These timepieces,” she told us. “Atomic powered. Virtually everlasting.”

“What about something really good?” I asked her—although nobody could possibly have said that the watch was not good. “Anti-gravity, or the interstellar drive?”

“And shunt the world on to a different Time Track?” she countered. “No thanks. I like my world the way it is. I like



me the way I am. But small luxury items will not influence the course of history."

"They will," I said, "if anybody opens 'em up to see what makes 'em tick."

"They will never go wrong," she assured me. "And they cannot be opened. And if anybody should try to break one open he will get no more than a blob of fused metal for his pains."

"Miss Verrill has something," said Sally thoughtfully.

"If she comes from the Future," I said, suddenly dubious.

"Switch on all the lights, Peter," ordered Sally. I obeyed her. "Look at that sweater," she said. "Look at those jeans . . ."

"What about them?"

"Men," said Sally scornfully. "It's obvious to the trained eye that those fabrics are far superior to any that we have. Superior—and different. Very different. That sweater, for example . . ."

"Venusian spider silk," Lorn Verrill told us.

"And the jeans?"

"Multicron."

"You see? Or don't you? Not that it matters." She turned again to our visitor. "Now, Miss Verrill, we're willing to go into business with you. Perhaps if you can give us some idea of what you want . . ."

"This is an exploratory trip, Mrs. . . ."

"You can call me Sally."

"This is an exploratory trip, Sally, and my time is limited." She glanced either at the watch or the control panel on the bracelet, or at both. "But I have two hours in hand . . ."

"Get dressed, Peter!" Sally snapped. "You'll excuse us a few minutes, Lorn, won't you?"

"Help yourself to another drink if you like," I added.

"This is the chance of a lifetime!" Sally whispered fiercely, inserting a shapely leg into one leg of her own jeans.

"It could be," I agreed. "But what will she want?"

"Just what everybody is wanting now. Hurry up, you clot!"

I hurried, Sally hurried. Together we almost ran back into the living room, were relieved to find Lorn Verrill still there. We swept her out of the back of the house and into the car. I ran to open the driveway gate—and then had to run to get aboard the vehicle as it charged out into the street. Then there



was delay, for which I was cursed, when Lorn Verrill was obliged to get out of the front seat to allow me to get into the back. But we got under way and in a very short time had embarked upon a moonlight tour of Paddington.

That old iron lace, on the old, reconditioned terrace houses, was good. With its bright new paint it stood out bravely in the light of our headlamps, in the light of the full moon. I could hear Lorn Verrill exclaiming, "But this is lovely! What couldn't I do with that? Stop, Sally, I want a good look at that balcony!" and so on. And I heard Sally say, "And the annoying part of it all is that only a few years ago this iron lace was regarded as rubbish. You could get it for nothing!"

And then the drive was over and we were pulling to a stop outside our house. Lorn Verrill was anxious and impatient, brushing past me as I opened the front door, running to her hexagon of metal panels. She was inside the hexagon, pulling the open panel into place, as Sally came in.

"Sorry," she called. "Time short. Can't stay. Thank you!"

The deep humming swelled in volume and the moonlight, and the light of the one lamp that we had left burning, assumed a ruddy tinge. And then the humming became a thin, intolerable whine, painful to the ears, and the tall form of our visitor inside the cage flickered and faded, flickered and faded and was gone. And the lights were back to normal, and the room was normal save for the hexagonal grouping of the panels and there was an oppressive silence broken by Sally, who said, "We're on to a good thing, Peter, a good thing."

She's a good businesswoman, is Sally.

But interior decorators, even in this day and age, are good businesswomen too, and anybody with a Doctorate in that art or science must be an exceptionally good businesswoman.

We went back to bed to try to get some sleep—and surprisingly, we did sleep. And when the alarm clock awakened us we talked for awhile to convince ourselves that we had not shared a particularly vivid dream.

Sally was first out of bed. I heard her cry out from the living room. I ran to see what it was that had excited and distressed her.

Our space divider was gone.



On the carpet, where its panels had been rearranged to form a hexagon, there were two parcels—a small one and a large one. And there was a very commonplace looking envelope addressed in a neat hand, *Peter and Sally*.

Sally tore open the envelope. Inside it was a single sheet of thick, creamy notepaper with an embossed letter heading. I read, over Sally's shoulder, *Lorn Verrill, D.I.D. Vegan Trust Building, Laurentian Square, Atlantia*. Underneath the address had been written, *The date doesn't matter*.

The letter itself was short and to the point.

*Dear Peter and Sally,*

*Sorry to have to do this to you, but I'm not in business for my health and must buy in the cheapest market as well as selling in the dearest. But please accept the accompanying small tokens of my regard.*

*Sincerely,  
Lorn Verrill.*

The wrapping of the parcels was a thick plastic that, once the seal was broken, vapourised into a fragrant mist. In the small one, addressed to myself, was one of the watches. In the larger one, addressed to Sally, was a sweater of the Venusian spider silk and a pair of the multicron jeans.

It's a good watch. By any normal standards it's a perfect watch. And that spider silk sweater washes and wears and wears and still looks as new as it did the day it was unpacked. And multicron is indeed a miracle fabric; if the simple directions on the leaflet that came with the jeans are followed the garment can be made to change colour, as desired, with every wash, and can be shrunk to form matador pants or shorts, or lengthened to make elegant tapered slacks. (An industrial chemist of our acquaintance to whom Sally gave a snipping for analysis told us crossly, after spending a frustrating month working on it, that he was a chemist and not a nuclear physicist and pleaded with us to tell him where we had obtained the material).

But there's been no real pleasure from the gifts.

For one thing, we haven't been able to replace our space divider; iron lace is more fantastically expensive with every passing day. And it's vanishing. Have you noticed? On Thursday you might admire a terrace house with something especially elegant decorating its balcony, and on Friday that



same terrace house will exhibit a glassed-in balcony, and that balcony will look as though it's been there for years. And you'll have the uneasy feeling that there's something wrong somewhere, or somewhen, and then decide that your memory is playing tricks on you.

And there seems to be a growing number of expensive looking wristwatches—watches without winding knobs, watches whose cases, although gleaming, show the subtle signs of years of wear. And Sally tells me that she is always spotting women, middle-aged or elderly women, wearing skirts or dresses obviously made from multicron.

There's no doubt about it.

Somewhen in the Past that shrewd businesswoman from the Future has the game all laced up.

*George Whitley*

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*Those of you who remember Phil High's "Project—Stall" in No. 83 will recollect that the extinct Martian civilisation had been based on organic engineering. In this new story he relates some side effects.*

# THE MARTIAN HUNTERS

by PHILIP E. HIGH

---

He knew who he was and yet—although his name was Compton and he could remember nearly all that had happened, he was not fully Compton. There was something else as if he had lived two entirely diverse lives which had left not only different backgrounds but different understandings and conceptions. The motives and aspirations of the one were entirely different to . . .

'I'm a schizoid,' he thought. 'A conscious schizoid.' Was there such a thing? Could a man have a divided personality and be fully conscious of it or was that a contradiction, an anomaly which could not really exist?

His head still ached and thudded painfully and his attempts at concentration were only brief flashes of lucidity which had a tendency to vanish as soon as they had come. There was a curious inclination to reason in terms of words and find conclusions in a series of particularly vivid mental pictures and this part of him—the picture part—was not Compton, it was . . .

"How are you feeling?" The voice was friendly and gentle.

He opened his eyes and blinked up at the white coat and at the eyes above the medical mask.



Feeling? How was he feeling? There was an answer somewhere, a specific answer for which the man was waiting.

"Not too bad, thank you." His own voice sounded strangely far away.

"Good, good." Fingers felt his pulse and a cold object touched his chest. "Breathe in, please."

The answer, the question and the man worried him and he tried to define his worry. *How are you feeling?* Yes—yes, despite the concern in the tone, the man had not *cared* how he was feeling. The proper question then should have been: *What is the state of your health?* and, by implication, *I do not care but it is my duty to enquire.* Why the concerned tone if the man did not care, surely that was the basest hypocrisy? Such a man was . . .

Compton realised suddenly that this reasoning was not his own, it was the other half of him. The half which could perceive but not understand the duplicity in normal conversation.

To say one thing and mean another, to dress the deceit in transparencies—ah, but the man did not know they were transparent! To him and those with whom he was associated, inflection and tone *concealed* the real meaning. Around him, then, were men not only capable of lying but lying for their own gain.

The half of him which was not Compton drew back in revulsion.

"Your reflexes are a little odd but generally you seem in fair shape." The doctor nodded thoughtfully. "How's the memory?"

"I remember my name, I remember why I am here and I think I remember that that was the last contact."

"Yes, it was the last. You will be under observation for some weeks and then we shall see how well the experiment succeeded."

There was expectation concealed in the words almost exultance. The doctor did not care about the risks he had taken and the agonies he had undergone. Those about him did not care. He, Compton, was a tool, an instrument fashioned without danger to themselves which they expected to pay dividends. If it did not pay dividends they would dispose of it and try again. There was always the possibility of course that the instrument might refuse to co-operate but,



by God, this had been foreseen and there were means to hand to *make* it.

Compton could not explain how he knew these things but he knew with certainty and the knowledge frightened him. God, this wasn't a government project as they'd told him. This was not for the benefit of humanity, this was . . .

He half rose in his bed and then the side of him which was Compton came to his aid and he did not say what he knew.

"Something wrong, old chap?"

"No—er—no, just a thought, bit muddled, you know." God, how easy it was to lie, he writhed inwardly. It had always been an impossibility, an abomination, such conduct would bring him—*Here* you could lie but if he were to remain true to the image of sanity—*Lying must be stopped*.

They could not see it, of course, but an impressed factor had suddenly become dominant. Those who had experimented on Compton had lost the first round.

It was a week before he had sufficient strength to leave the bed, another ten days before he could walk shakily across the room.

They gave him books and a comfortable chair but when the attendants had gone he rose and crossed unsteadily to the window.

There was a wide lawn beyond the window, green and peaceful with two striped deck chairs under some tall trees. Two men lay in the deck chairs as if asleep but Compton knew they were not ordinary men and they were not asleep. Around the building were other men he could not see and they also were not sleeping.

Beyond the lawn and the trees and the deck chairs was a tall thick hedge. He thought the hedge looked cool and peaceful but he had the sudden mental impression that the green leaves concealed a barbed and electrified fence.

He did not question the impression. He *knew* it was there although he could not see it with his eyes.

He turned slowly and went back to his chair. In a week or two they would come and ask questions. They would ask and he would refuse to answer and then, of course . . .

Compton knew he must escape, but how? And then, as if apart from himself, a series of vivid mental pictures came tumbling into his mind.



A Protector? Where would he find a Protector? Of course, if such a thing were procurable, all he needed to do was . . .

Then for the first time since regaining consciousness Compton *knew*. He knew exactly what he was, who he was and why he was here. He recognised, and acknowledged, the existence of something within himself which now directed his future conduct and re-shaped the very basis of his thinking.

He saw, with inescapable logic, that there was no way back and with the acceptance came not only the answer to his imprisonment but rapidly returning strength.

Slowly, and with infinite care, he concentrated on a command.

Miles away, Maybrook walked slowly along the corridor lost in thought. It was too bad that Walsh had reached retirement age and, worse still, that, he, Maybrook, had been granted a dubious promotion in his place.

He was wondering vaguely why he was here. Ancient relics might be of incalculable value to the scientists and, conceivably, open up vast storehouses of knowledge to the masses in the future but right now it seemed an unnecessary waste of trained men. Why, with the political situation as it was, almost any incident could trigger off the inevitable.

He sighed. Human nature didn't change, did it? One's ancestors sweated their guts out to bring about a united world and now, in the place of warring nations, were warring political parties. In every nation now, in every capital and village, rival factions were arming to ensure that *their* particular brand of administration gained absolute power in World Government.

ONE WORLD! ONE NATION! ONE PARTY! It had become a slogan which threatened to disrupt the peace of centuries. The restraining factor of an all-party democratic parliamentary system might at any moment be overthrown and one of the extremist groups take its place. Yet, with an explosive situation like that, he had been sent here to guard some relics.

Obviously H.Q. were out of touch. A mansion set in a thousand acre estate with a standing guard of two hundred Security men made no sense at all. True it was nice to be promoted to the command of two hundred men but not on an ill-balanced mission like this.



Maybrook reached a door which looked like oak. It slid aside disconcertingly before he could tap it and a voice said : "Come in."

He found himself in a large quiet room with comfortable chairs, shelves and shelves of books and a pseudo-fire burning cheerful in a large old-fashioned hearth.

A man rose from behind a wide desk, hand extended. "Captain Maybrook I believe. Glad to have you with us."

Maybrook bowed a little stiffly and gripped the extended hand, his trained eyes taking in details.

"I am Director Saffry. Please sit down, Captain." He smiled. "A drink?"

"Thank you, no." He sat down with the faintest suggestion of formality and the other pushed across a box.

"Cigars on the left, cigarettes on the right."

"Thank you." Maybrook helped himself to a cigarette, making mental notes of the other's appearance. He saw a pleasant faced man of medium build with slightly receding dark hair. The eyes were concealed by tinted and obsolete rimless spectacles which gave a curious sense of remoteness to the face.

The Director waited until the other was comfortable. "I expect you wonder why you are here. Your predecessor was also mildly incensed at being chosen to manage the Security side of the project."

Maybrook kicked himself mentally. He had not been aware that his dissatisfaction was 'visible.' On the other hand the Director must be a singularly observant man. He made a rapid re-appraisal. Acute observation—outside of Security, that is—was, he felt, almost a breach of etiquette.

"I'd like to know what I'm supposed to be guarding," he said, evenly.

Saffry smiled. "Well, the accepted story is Martian relics which we've been shipping in for years but it goes much deeper than that."

"How much deeper?"

"Almost the entire technology of the Martian race."

Maybrook was too well trained to say 'Good God !' but he thought it. Suddenly the picture began to make sense. If any of the numerous political parties could lay their hands on the technology of an advanced race they could not only dominate the political scene but the whole world.



"What happened to the Martians?"

Saffry shrugged. "Briefly, they evolved to a point which made the habitation of their planet inconsistent with their conceptions of the universe. They moved to a place more suited to their state of development."

Maybrook nodded, thought it sounded like double-talk but was prepared to go along. He was learning, the object of this meeting was to learn. "They left their civilisation behind them I take it?"

"A complete city, bigger than London and New York combined, with every mechanism and building in full functioning order."

"I was given to understand the whole project was a flop."

Saffry chuckled. "Your Security Chiefs thought it wiser to give that impression. Of course, it was a flop at first. Martian civilisation and technology developed along entirely different lines to our own and it took some little time to realise it." Saffry sighed. "The expedition got a bad name in the first few years, it was thought that we were 'covering up' and the news people dubbed us 'Project—Stall!'"

"You were on the original project?"

"Yes, I'm a rejuvenate." The Director sighed again. "A somewhat dubious reward for my services on Mars, you know, but being forty years of age for a period of ninety years isn't all honey, but for the absorbing interest of my work."

"I take it you haven't unlocked all the secrets of Martian technology?"

"No." Saffry shook his head slowly. "To be honest we've only skimmed the surface."

"The Martian machines must be very complicated." Maybrook hoped he was saying the right thing.

The Director smiled faintly. "Possibly my choice of words confuses you. The Martians never used machines."

"But you said they were in advance of us, you referred to a technology." Maybrook felt a sudden irritation. What was Saffry playing at—some sort of guessing game?

The director leaned forward. "It is difficult to understand, I know. The Martians were brilliant in their own particular field—they were *organic* engineers." He paused then went on before the other could interrupt. "They constructed organic mechanisms and put them to work for them just as we construct mechanical devices and make them work for us. To



draw a crude parallel, the combustion engine is a mechanical device, the human heart an organic mechanism. The Martians made a kind of pseudo-life, an organic substance which obeyed their orders and carried out the routine functions of their civilisation just as we use robots, auto-factories and other mechanical devices to carry out the functions of ours."

"But heating—lighting—" For the first time in his life Maybrook felt he was losing his grip.

Saffry smiled. "Pseudo-life contains it's own lighting mechanism—you may draw a crude comparison with a glow worm—and, since it is organic, can decrease or increase its body heat. On Mars everything has pseudo-life, houses were *grown* and, when mature, responded to the commands of their owners as did every constructed object in their civilisation."

"It sounds fantastic."

"It is fantastic—would you like to see a demonstration?"

"Yes I would." Maybrook knew he wasn't going to believe it.

Saffry took him to an elevator and they went down to what he referred to as the vaults. It was, thought the Security man, big enough to house an underground railway system. Endless rows of shelves stretched into the distance, all were packed with what looked like balls of varying sizes.

"This is the Martian technology?" Maybrook had extreme difficulty keeping the disbelief out of his voice.

"Yes, each container houses some form of organic mechanism." He took one down. "As you see the top may be removed—so."

"But it's full of goo—er—orange coloured jelly."

"So it appears." Saffry held the container closer. "Note the symbols on the side resembling a kind of inverted Braille, this is part of the somewhat limited Martian language."

Maybrook leaned forward, above the symbols was a printed label in English which made no sense at all. It said: PUMP FOR GAS OR LIQUIDS.

Maybrook read it again and wondered if Saffry was playing an elaborate joke. Perhaps this was some sort of initiation ceremony. Sooner or later a crowd of laughing people would burst out from one of the side corridors and tell him he joined the fraternity. Better string along.

"Your disbelief is showing." Saffry was smiling. "In that alcove on your left you will find a tap and two large



buckets. If you would be good enough to fill one of the buckets and bring them both to me."

"Certainly." Maybrook nodded, trying to keep his mind a blank. Did a man's brain soften after rejuvenation?

"Thank you." Saffry placed both buckets on the floor, removed the lid from the container and laid it to one side.

"Watch, please." He placed the container between the two buckets and stepped back.

Maybrook resisted a temptation to laugh contemptuously. In the spherical container was a mass of orange coloured jelly and nothing more. Obviously . . . A coldness seemed to press suddenly against the back of his neck and the muscles in his face stiffened painfully.

The orange substance was moving as if alive. Feeling that his eyes were protruding, he watched twin tendrils grow from the jelly and reach out towards the buckets. The nearest tendril touched the water and the jelly in the container began to pulsate like a slowly beating heart.

Maybrook heard the water trickling into the empty bucket without really believing it. He watched until the empty bucket became full and the other empty. He saw the tendrils withdraw, the pulsations slowly cease and then there was nothing more than some orange coloured goo in a round container.

Saffry bent down, picked up the container and replaced it on the shelf. "Disturbing at first, isn't it? But, as you see, it works."

"Yes—er—yes." Maybrook's mouth felt dry and he was irritated to find he had been gripping the gun in his pocket so tightly that his fingers were stiff.

Saffry seemed irritatingly calm. "The tips of the pseudopods will harden if instructed to do so, ideal for transfusions if you could find anyone with the stomach for it. The mechanism would maintain the fluid at the correct temperature, you see."

Maybrook opened his mouth but had to clear his throat noisily before he could speak. "What the hell made it *work*. I didn't see you press a button or anything."

"Didn't I mention that? I'm sorry. The Martians were a telepathic race, their mechanisms respond to a mental command. We're not telepathic, of course, but Martian pseudo-life is so acutely sensitive that it will respond if you



think hard enough." He made a deprecating gesture. "There's a knack in it, of course, you have to concentrate, think *at* the thing and have the command clearly in your mind."

Maybrook said: "I see," and found he was sweating.

Saffry waved his hand vaguely. "In this section all the mechanisms have been tested but from this corridor onwards we are completely in the dark. For instance," he pointed, "MATHEMATICAL DEVICE is too obscure to help us. One cannot order a device to function when one does not understand its purpose, neither can one frame a clear mental command."

"Some of these mechanisms are weapons?" Maybrook had regained control of nerves.

"Oh, yes, but for obvious reasons we have not commanded them to function. We ourselves might be destroyed before we could countermand the order. We have no inkling either of their principles or their destructive power."

"What did the Martians look like?"

"That we do not know. They left no murals or pictures of themselves. If they left anything at all it was probably a telepathic impression in the library."

"Library? They had books?"

Saffry smiled at him briefly. "I'd better show you. This way."

"This is the *library*?" Maybrook looked at him disbelievingly. Packed on the shelves were endless rows of what looked like green jelly cubes wrapped up in cellophane.

"The Martian equivalent of books." Saffry pointed. "Each cube contains not print but a telepathic impression, we call them 'thought cubes.' On Mars I took upon myself the risky experiment of touching one of the cubes without the wrapping. Fortunately I chose a subject for an infant but even so I was laid out cold for seven hours. The human mind has to be extremely elastic to adapt not only to alien thought impressions but to totally new conceptions. One of our party died in an ill-advised pursuit of advanced knowledge"

"One can receive such impressions?"

"Only by direct contact. All one has to do is to concentrate on the desired subject, the cube will light, slide forward and unwrap itself." Saffry laughed softly. "As a matter of fact we had a flap here about four years ago. As the cubes are exceedingly dangerous all the shelves are wired to an alarm



in case of theft. Well, the alarm rang, everyone ran down here but nothing was missing, some fault in the circuit no doubt."

Maybrook pulled his ear thoughtfully, the subject had suddenly become deeply interesting. "You, yourself, risked limited instruction, could a man proceed by easy steps to an advanced subject?"

"Funny you should ask that. We once drew up a list of psychologically suitable volunteers who might survive such an experiment. We found fourteen but later abandoned the idea as too dangerous."

"Only fourteen!"

"The mind must be extremely elastic and the subject—well—rather special. The Martians were a highly ethical race who valued justice and personal integrity above all else."

"How do you know that?"

Saffry smiled, an almost secret smile. "I touched a thought cube."

Maybrook laughed, he was beginning to like Saffry. "You seem—"

He was interrupted by a sudden jangling sound.

"My God, the alarm!" The director's face was suddenly colourless. "This way." He turned and ran down a side corridor.

Maybrook followed. Quite unconsciously he had drawn his gun but he had no idea what the alarm meant.

He almost ran into the director who had stopped round the next corner. "What is it—an attack on the project?"

Saffry did not answer the question. "We're too late, far too late." He pointed.

One of the spherical containers was open, it was larger than most, and it was quite empty. There was the now familiar printed label on the side:—

PROTECTOR

CLASSIFICATION — WEAPON

Maybrook felt a coldness creep up his back. "Are you trying to tell me that one of those damn things has got loose? My God, we've got to stop it."

"We can't, it could get out through a drain as liquid, searching for it would be pointless. The vital step is to find the person responsible."

Maybrook looked at him blankly. "I don't follow you."



"Good God, man!" Saffry was suddenly angry. "If a robot started trundling away on its own you'd know someone had pressed the starting switch, wouldn't you? It's like that here, someone knew the purpose of this weapon, framed the correct mental command and set it in motion—"

There were more men surrounding the house now, more striped deck chairs and an atmosphere of growing tension.

Compton sat in the chair patiently undergoing another examination. Words, wrapt in transparencies, tumbled from the doctor's mouth. "Yes, you seem to have made very good progress." *Pulse and heart far too rapid, temperature too high, yet, curiously he seems in perfect health.*

"Memory O.K.? Good." *Basil says he can't get a thing out of him, psychologically he's a complete mess.*

"You're looking fine, you know." *How's that for a damn lie, the bloke gives me the creeps. Not that there's any change if you look. Same face, same brown eyes and dark hair. It's something suggested, something in the eyes and in the way he moves.*

"We'll let you out in the grounds for some exercise to-morrow." *We shan't, of course, we have to start squeezing out the information then. Probably be difficult at first until he sees we mean business but then—*

Compton waited until he had gone then walked slowly to the window. It was close now, very close. It knew what it had to do and there was nothing, literally nothing, on this world capable of stopping it.

Three hours later four wires in the electrified fence parted with a twang and, in the house, a master fuse blew out with a dull plopping explosion.

The men in deck chairs sprang to their feet, their hands reaching swiftly for their pockets.

From an upstairs window a voice shouted: "Watch it! Someone has cut the wire."

Men came running out of the main door. They wore black, rather theatrical looking uniforms and carried squat automatic weapons.

It was then that the men who had been in deck chairs began to scream. They clutched at their throats, fired a few wild shots and fell to their knees. The black uniformed men saw them fall over and lie still.



Maybrook had worked hard. "We've checked the background of the entire personnel." He smiled briefly at the director. "Although you and Mr. Selby are the only two who can really work these Martian horrors you are both in the clear, neither of you have left the project for eight years. We have one lead—I shall refer to later—but, in the meantime, this is how I think it was done. Someone with access to the library smuggled in a substance similar in size and shape to a thought cube and did a switch—that was when the alarm went four years ago."

"Everyone is checked from head to toe leaving *and* entering" said Lovell, his assistant.

Maybrook turned over a page in his notebook. "I know. Check August sixteen for four years ago just the same."

"Yes, sir." Lovell departed quickly.

"As for suspects, I'm afraid I must pick on a director." Maybrook put down his note book. "I pick Bertram Courtain financial director, industrialist and known Autocratic sympathiser. Would this man know enough to direct a command at a thought cube?"

Selby, the Curator, shrugged. "You could do it. All one needs to do is to stand there and think hard on a given subject. Courtain would have had access to the library—still has. He would also have enough sense not to touch one."

Maybrook looked at him quickly. "True, if my theory is right he got someone else to handle the dangerous side."

Lovell returned. "Only one entrance on the sixteenth, sir, Courtain's chauffeur. Here's the record, sir. Courtain did not leave with him but stayed on the project another four days."

"Why did the chauffeur come?"

"He brought a confidential file for Mr. Courtain, sir."

"I see." Maybrook studied the record, frowning. "Why the groceries in the back of the flyer?"

"According to the record, sir, the man often went shopping for the Courtain household before calling for his master."

"And it became routine?"

"Before my time, sir, but I suppose it did. In any case, sir, the complete list was checked item by item in *and* out, he couldn't—"

Maybrook half rose. "But he *did*." His finger stabbed at an item. "Seven jelly cubes came in and seven 'thought cubes' went out. They're so exactly alike that even *I* might



have passed them. Seven thought cubes labelled HORTONS DELICIOUS TABLE JELLIES—my God !” He turned to Saffry. “In his place, having selected seven thought cubes in progressive stages, what would you do ?”

“I suppose I’d find a suitable subject for experiment.”

“Precisely, have you that list of volunteers ?”

“Why, yes, in this drawer—” He handed it over.

Maybrook studied it. “Those at the top the most suitable ?”

“Yes but you won’t find Mulhall, he was killed in an air accident two years ago.”

“It’s Compton then. Lovell, send out a top priority tracer for Compton, details are in the records.” He turned back to Saffry. “Know anything about him ?”

“Sufficient. He was dedicated and utterly sincere. A thought cube would turn a crook into a gibbering idiot.”

Maybrook nodded quickly. “We’ve got the picture then. They stole the cubes, inveigled Compton into becoming a guinea pig and now under duress or for his own protection he has called that thing out of the vaults. You get the idea don’t you ? Once he has absorbed the information in the cubes they can squeeze it out for their own use. I can just imagine what they’ll do with it.”

Saffry lit a cigarette thoughtfully. “They won’t find it that easy. If he has survived the impact of seven thought cubes there will be certain changes in outlook—”

Maybrook stood up and shrugged angrily. “If the autocrats have him they’ll *make* him talk or kill him trying.”

Lovell returned. “H.Q. say that Compton disappeared in South America four and a half years ago.”

“I was right then. I think, if he’s still alive, we’ll find him at Courtain’s country house—flyer ready ?”

“Yes, sir, standing by.”

He never reached the flyer because the emergency button in his pocket checked him in mid-stride.

He inserted the ear-mike and listened, frowning. Area H.Q. had received a report of trouble at Courtain’s country estate. According to the anonymous informant a member of the staff had gone insane and run amok in the grounds. He was armed and dangerous.

Maybrook repeated the report to Lovell and said : “Clever,” bitterly. “I take my hat off to the autocrats, that was quick thinking.”



"I don't follow." Lovell looked puzzled.

"Obviously Compton escaped before they could get to work on him. If he gets to us before they find him he'll tell the whole story and they can't afford the repercussions. They know damn well that such a revelation would not only give us grounds for disbanding them politically but would discredit the party forever. They are, therefore," Maybrook smiled grimly, "shifting the onus on to us. An armed madman, how convenient if we kill him. In due course, no doubt, we shall receive further anonymous tips together with a complete description. Our friends are quite capable of producing the bodies of the alleged victims to work up the necessary hysteria. Their political opponents might also get wind of the affair and try grabbing Compton for themselves. As I have said, how very convenient if we did the job, or better still, were legal witnesses of a carefully staged execution. They can't afford to keep him alive now, so they'll be all out to kill." Maybrook paused and frowned angrily at Saffry. "What are you smiling at?"

"I was just thinking I'd be sorry to try," said Saffry, mildly. "He will not be *quite* as people imagine and everyone seems to forget he is not alone."

He sat in the top room of an abandoned farmhouse and waited. He was quite calm and quite untroubled. He knew that men would come and they would try and kill him. Their failure would, of course, bring more responsible government agents to his side and then he would be safe. After, he would be taken to the project where his specialised knowledge . . . There was still sickness in the world, still confusion and chaos. Not that he had any intention of imposing his will upon others, one's responsibility to intelligent life could never be more than the position of a servant. He sighed softly and relaxed.

The old house had half its roof missing and the walls ran with moisture. Directly beneath one of the western air lanes it vibrated continuously to the constant flow of high speed air traffic but it was ideal for his purpose. It was isolated from the main highways and, when the shooting started, there would be no innocent bystanders to fall victim to hysterical shots.

He stirred, a curiously fluid motion of timing and control which would have been impossible and jerky in a normal man.



Outside, he sensed, men were slowly surrounding him. He waited and the ring grew together, thickened and was finally complete.

A voice boomed suddenly from outside. "All right, Compton, we know you're there. Come out with your hands up and you won't be harmed." *Much! All he needs to do is show himself.*

"We'll give you three minutes, Compton." *We can afford that but no more. After our tip the top Security boys will be here within fifteen.*

"If you don't come out then we intend to blow the place apart." *Not too much apart. We want your body in one piece so that we can stick a gun in your hand to prove you fought it out. Liggins copped it from that gun, he was untrustworthy anyway but he's useful dead.*

"One minute, Compton. I don't want to come in and kill you personally." *No, certainly not that. It was said that what they had done to Compton had made him—well—peculiar. Greeves said he looked—not quite human.*

In the house Compton felt a sudden sadness. Children, just children, violent and aggressive, too impatient to pause and reason.

Beside him something shifted with a liquid sound and, outside, the dogs they had used to track him suddenly cringed and whimpered.

"Too damn late—as we expected." Maybrook was clear of the flyer before it touched the ground.

Men were already going into the broken-down building and from the back there was a burst of firing.

He ran forward, Lovell beside him. "Call them off, get those men out of there."

"Too late, I'm afraid, Captain Maybrook." One of the Autocrat Lieutenants, thinly disguised as a holiday-maker, appeared conveniently at his side. "I was at Courtain's place for the weekend when this chap went berserk. He'd got a gun from somewhere and we all had to run for cover. Liggins tried to reason with him and got killed."

Maybrook snarled at him: "What the hell are all you people doing with guns?"

The Lieutenant laughed softly. He was a thin pantherish man with black hair greased so tightly to his scalp it looked like glossed paint. "Don't be naive, Captain. We know



guns are illegal but today everyone is in fear of political enemies."

"With types like you around one cannot blame them." Maybrook strode grimly forward.

From inside the building came shots. As he had suspected, he was too late, by the time he got in there everything would be conveniently rigged to fit the story and he'd never unearth a witness.

Inside the house a man screamed, thinly and hysterically. A man leapt from a lower window and hurled himself across the unkempt lawn.

Three more were suddenly struggling frantically at the front door to get out, something seemed wrapped round them—jelly—a mass of greenish whipping tendrils. The men fell over and were suddenly still.

Dully Maybrook became aware that the Lieutenant had turned and was running away. All about him, men were panicking and throwing away their arms. Strangely he, himself, was curiously calm and unaffected.

"You're going in?" Lovell's voice was shaken.

"Of course I'm going in. Watch my back, someone might regain their nerve and try a few shots."

He walked into the house and up the rickety stairs. He reached the landing and, without conscious consideration, chose the first door he saw.

"I'm from Security." He was still quite calm.

"I have been waiting for you. I am glad you came." The figure in the corner was in shadow and he was unable to see the face.

"I am here to protect you—you understand that?"

"Only if I satisfy you that I am not dangerous and do not threaten society, otherwise you will kill me."

"You read minds?"

"No, I cannot read a human mind but I can discern the motivation behind words. Had you remained silent your intentions would have remained a closed book."

"I see." Maybrook made a movement to sit down. Suddenly he felt weak and a little shaky.

"Please do not sit on that box—it is not a box."

"Eh?" Maybrook drew back hastily. "You set that thing loose on those men."



"They are not harmed, they will regain consciousness within an hour. As for letting it loose, it never left my side."

"But I saw—"

"You saw the mental picture it projected to protect me and to cause panic to my assailants. As one would expect of a highly advanced race, their weapons were mental rather than physical. The Martians used these mechanisms when they were stellar explorers to soothe and control savage animals, they are not primarily aggressive."

Maybrook leaned tiredly against the wall. "What is that thing, anyway?"

"It's a robot, of course. True it's organic but it's still a robot. Don't underestimate it because of that. If necessary it could conquer the world but, of course, it won't. It was constructed to protect its master but is so perfectly fashioned that were I to lose my sense of proportion and desire power for it's own sake it would protect me against myself."

"Protect you!"

"Cure my mental sickness. We—the Martians, that is, were a highly ethical race." Compton paused and moved slightly out of the shadow. "I gather from your words you know my story?"

"We've pieced it together—what do you intend to do?"

"Go into the project I hope. There is much more to learn and so much I can do. I can no longer live among normal people, you see, they would feel uncomfortable and perhaps alarmed in my presence. The impact of the Martian viewpoint on the human mind makes rather sweeping changes all round."

Maybrook nodded, strangely understanding. He knew exactly what Compton was trying to say but knew that he, himself, could not put it into words.

He said: "I'll try and arrange things but the government will probably hush you up for the same reason it turned the Martian civilisation into so many relics."

"Thank you." Compton stepped out of the shadows. "There is an old saying that as man thinks so he is. I have not looked into a mirror yet but I feel—"

Maybrook stared. Compton was still Compton and yet—He stared for a long time.



"I'd better go down first and see there are no sharpshooters still lurking around."

On the path he almost knocked over director Saffry who was striding up with two Security men as guards.

"Well? Well? Is he safe, Captain?"

"Quite safe." Maybrook's shoulders slumped a little wearily.

"Thank God." Saffry fumbled for a cigarette. "I know I'm impatient but what's he like?"

"Like?" Maybrook thought about it then he grinned faintly. "There's only one answer to that. *You'll* put a label on him. *CLASSIFICATION — MARTIAN.*"

*Philip E. High*

## THE LITERARY LINE-UP

The new series of Guest Editorials are already proving highly popular and we hope to see many letters from readers coming up in "Postmortem" shortly. Meanwhile, next month's contribution will be by John Brunner on "Our Present Requirements."

On the fiction side, apart from the conclusion of Rupert Clinton's "The Golden Age," which takes some unexpected turns, there will be a novelette by Peter Hawkins entitled "Black Knowledge," wherein the technical library of an advance race is discovered and of the dangerous situation if Man is to dip into the knowledge revealed; plus short stories by J. G. Ballard, David Rome and Philip E. High.

Story ratings for No. 107 were :

- |                                |   |   |   |                |
|--------------------------------|---|---|---|----------------|
| 1. Put Down This Earth, Part 1 | - | - | - | John Brunner   |
| 2. Delete The Variable         | - | - | - | Phillip Heath  |
| 3. Mantrap                     | - | - | - | Kathleen James |
| 4. Jackpot                     | - | - | - | E. C. Tubb     |
| 5. Morpheus                    | - | - | - | Robert Hoskins |



*It was an unusual phenomena for Mars—a cloud just could not exist there. But this one did and brought with it some complex problems.*

# E C H O

by LEE HARDING

---

It all began with a smudge on one of McGivern's survey photos.

"There are no clouds on Mars, young man," I said, regarding the 5in. x 5in. xerographic print dubiously. "Not like this there aren't."

Tom shrugged his skinny shoulders. "Well, you tell *me* what it is, then."

I studied the photograph carefully. Like the majority of the aerial reconnaissance shots processed in our labs the result was a dark, almost featureless grey. The films we were using were ultra-red sensitive, designed to yield a highly-contrasty image and throw any such things as vegetation, canyons, fissures and the like into bold relief. For the most part it was dreadfully monotonous. When it came around to arranging the hundreds of prints into a mosaic for re-photographing it was easy to go quietly mad.

But this shot was different. There was a white, egg-shaped blob about half an inch long slightly off-centre of the picture.

I grunted. "It looks like a fog-mark."

McGivern shook his head. "Uh, uh. That was the first thing I checked. And besides. I've never seen a fog-mark like that."



"There's always a first time for everything." I picked up a hand magnifier and studied the area in question. It certainly didn't look like a typical Martian cloud. With the exception of a few wispy, pseudo-cumulus traces around the poles, such things were virtually non-existent.

The most curious features were the regularity of its edges. They were razor-sharp beneath the magnifying glass.

Most decidedly un-cloudlike.

"It could be reflection," I mused. "Or some form of atmospheric haze."

The look in Tom's eyes frankly expressed his doubts.

I sighed heavily and got up from behind my desk. "All right then, let's both go and have a look at the negative."

We went around to the processing room and I waited patiently while he spun off the roll of negatives across the opal screen.

"That's it."

I leaned over his shoulder and studied the negative carefully. "You're right. It certainly doesn't *look* like a fog mark." I straightened up. "And how big would you say it was?"

He did some swift mental arithmetic. "The altitude reading says thirty thousand feet. Using a five inch lens that would work out to, oh—say roughly three miles long. Something like that."

I stared back at the puzzling picture. "How long ago was this run completed?"

"This lot came in yesterday so it couldn't have been more than twenty-four hours previous to that."

"Any idea how far away that area is?"

"I can check with the Bird boys."

"Do that right away, would you?" I pressed the switch and watched the roll of negatives spool swiftly off into the machine. "Anything unusual would be worth investigating around this God-forsaken planet. Even if it is some form of optical phenomena it will at least break the monotony."

He grinned happily and shot off to get the required information from the Bird hangers.

I was back at my desk poking gloomily at a mess of prints when he came bouncing in, face flushed with excitement.

"Well?" I asked.



"A hundred and eighty-seven miles north-east of Base at a rough estimate. Fortunately, the Bird that made this particular run only had a very small area over by the Plains to cover, otherwise it might have been days before this thing cropped up."

The Birds are the automated aerial survey platforms we use to map the surface of Mars, the object being to prepare detail maps in preparation for the swarm of geologists we're expecting to land out here just as soon as the political squabbling over appropriations simmers down a bit back home. Some like to call them Pigeons because they all return to Base with an unerring cybernetic instinct similar to a true homing bird. To most of us they're simply—The Birds.

"You'd better hop out and take a look at it," I said. "Nobody's noticed it out there before." The Plains area was a spot frequented by Base personnel at least several times a week during prospecting and ecological forays. It lay at the foot of a long, low series of mounds that at one time must have been a great mountain range but which time had weathered down to a pitiful remainder.

Systematic aerial mapping had only begun a little over a week ago and it was only natural that we should begin our operations in the immediate vicinity of the Base, particularly as the Plains area had surrendered the most promising mineral deposits.

We had certainly never seen clouds forming out there before.

I sent McGivern off with two of the boys on relief from the Wall and sat down to wait. I had a feeling that I should have gone myself, but what the heck? It would probably turn out to be non-existent when the boys and their floater arrived to scour the land beneath the lens of the survey Bird. Just a combination of atmospheric phenomena coupled with tricky light rays and probably a bit of muck over the lens. Or something flying past beneath the Bird. No, that was even more preposterous.

And why hadn't it happened before?

My head ached trying to find solutions before the jeep arrived back. I'm no scientist. Cartography's my business, which is just a fancy way of saying I draw maps. If this thing was going to turn out to be a wild goose chase then I was better off trying to catch up on my own work. There was plenty of it.



The jeep arrived back late in the afternoon. I was on my way back from the messrooms when I saw the hovercraft arrowing in across the horizon. I crawled into a suit and went out to meet them.

A ghost of a breeze was ruffling sand around their feet as they alighted from the jeep. I couldn't make out their features behind their helmets as I approached but their very manner seemed to telegraph apprehension. I quickened my steps and drew up to them.

"Well?" I asked, my voice carrying across the arid Martian air without the benefit of radio assistance. "What's the verdict?"

McGivern turned to face me, his expression sombre and a trifle bewildered behind the plasti-glass of the suit helmet. "Oh, it's there all right. And it's bigger."

I froze, staring curiously back at the three stiff figures. "How do you mean?"

He shrugged, stiffly in the insulated suit, and said: "It just seems bigger, that's all."

"What's it like?"

"A cloud. A silly, damn cloud . . ."

"It's like nothing I've ever seen," one of the other boys put in.

"It's not like any cloud I've ever seen," the other suddenly spluttered. I could see he was more nervous than the others. Just what had we stumbled upon?

"We circled around it for about half an hour or so," McGivern explained. "We flew through it without any trouble."

"That was a damn fool thing to do," I snapped.

"It was just a cloud . . ."

"Cloud nothing. That's no more a cloud than I am. The three of you get over and wait in my office until I get back. And not a word to anybody about this, you understand?"

They nodded assent and I left them and made a bee-line for Thompson's quarters.

Our commanding officer isn't a man easily excitable. He listened to my report with a calm, detached expression that made me wonder at first if he was really listening. His remarks at the conclusion of my speech soon dispelled this idea.



"Do you think there's a possibility that these boys could be a little on the impressionable side?" he asked shrewdly.

I shrugged. "No more than most. But there must be something out there, Ted . . ."

"Undoubtedly, undoubtedly. Whether or not it's worth all the trouble of investigating further I don't know. You fellows seem to get all fired up over the littlest things."

"Little or not, anything alien is worth investigating."

"True, true." He pursed his lips and grinned roguishly. I felt foolish at having let him draw me out so easily. He knew damn well how important this whole thing was to the rest of us. To Commander Edward Thompson it was only a job. Perhaps that was why he was the head of the whole operation and the rest of us merely the cogs in the wheel. Who was it said that dreamers never make good generals?

"While I'm inclined to believe that this planet is as dead as the proverbial doornail," he went on, "I can't very well go having everybody else around here believing that, now can I? All right, we'll go out and have a look at this Cloud of McGivern's. And, by God, it had better be there . . ."

I hoped for Tom's sake that it would be.

The following morning, Thompson ordered one of the big jeeps readied and together with McGivern and Stewart, one of the boys off duty from the Wall, we set off to find our mysterious cloud.

I hadn't mentioned anything to Eric Kemp yet. I had seen him disappointed too often to raise any false hopes for him. And besides, he had been working a sixteen hour shift out along the Wall for a number of days, working slowly and painfully with the men under his command and trying to uncover the fragile remnants of a technological feat that had existed for millions of years. The Wall was only a few pitiful feet high above the desert and crumbling for most of its hundred and fifty mile length. But it was something to work on, something to make the existence of Base worthwhile. What did it matter if the results of all their careful chipping and brushing and rubbing amounted to little more than a handful of almost invisible hieroglyphics per mile? As long as there was *something*.

It mattered to Eric. Quite simply, it wasn't enough. Even the biologists had something more to go on. An alien world



was easily visible beneath their microscopes, a world teeming with bacteriological life of infinite variety.

Eric's world was dead a thousand centuries before we arrived. It was like ferreting in a graveyard for a few baubles and then finding they were useless. No wonder he felt bitter.

The trip took just over an hour. These new jeeps can kick along at a pretty smart pace in the rarified Martian atmosphere. A cool hundred and forty miles an hour is little effort.

For the most part, the area of the planet immediately surrounding the Base is composed of gently undulating hills that resemble dunes more than anything else. The landscape gives more the appearance of a gently rolling sea. After about a hundred and twenty miles the surface smoothes out into a long, flat, featureless desert that seems to stretch towards infinity.

This was the beginning of the Plains. And it was just north east of here that Tom had seen his cloud.

I gave a little start of surprise when the edge of the thing first appeared ahead of us. So it *was* there, after all.

It stood out against the deep purple sky just like any other cloud, only this cloud just couldn't exist under those conditions. As we closed the distance the whiteness assumed a more greyish colour.

I'll never forget the look on Commander Thompson's face when he first beheld the cloud. It was like watching a dogged, determined fighter come up against a k.o.

Ted is, by nature, a character with his two feet solidly imbedded in reality. In his job anything else would be disastrous. When you're saddled with a bunch of dreaming boffins it's just as well to keep your head above them, otherwise there would be one awful mess. You only had to look at his strong, determined jaw and weather-beaten features to know that here was a man who stood for little nonsense. Together, we shared the advantage of years over the rest of Base personnel. Ted was fifty-two and I was forty-nine, which made the rest of the boys around us seem kids. I suppose the dry, decaying atmosphere of Mars agreed with old buzzards like us. At least, we *felt* that old.

It was quiet for some time in the jeep while the Cloud came up to meet us, swelling before us like a great, motionless egg. Only the low hum of the motors disturbed the stillness. Overhead the purple, almost black sky shone sharply through



the plasti-glass canopy, a host of stars twinkling coldly through the thin air. Inside, we breathed comfortably without the need for suits. Below, the dry sands were whipped up by our pulsating jets.

Next to me, McGivern said : " It's growing. It *is* getting bigger."

" Are you sure ?" I asked, doubtful. He nodded. I left acceptance of his statement to a later date. In the meantime, there was the cloud as it was to consider.

" It's queer," Thompson grunted, just a suggestion of nervousness hovering behind his quiet pronouncement. " It *can't* be a cloud, though." He leant over Stewart at the controls of the floater. " Better cut speed."

The boy nodded assent. The whine of the motors dwindled slowly. His eyes, like all of us, were glued on the expanding spectre of the Cloud.

By now, it most definitely had become The Cloud.

It grew and spread before us like a monstrous raincloud with ridiculously symmetrical edges. We guessed it to be about four miles across and possibly two hundred feet high. The depth we would ascertain when we cruised round the thing.

While it had the appearance of a terrestrial cloud, there all semblance ended. Apart from the clean edges of the thing it was obviously not in motion. The surface was as blank and as featureless as a wall. It just lay there on the desert floor as though it belonged there.

And that was impossible. Any moisture in the thing would long ago have been absorbed by the hungry desert.

" Stop the jeep," Thompson said. Stewart's hands flickered over the controls and the hovercraft slackened speed right off and descended slowly to the desert floor.

Silence lay heavily around us. Outside, the wall of the cloud stretched away on either side of us, a bare two hundred yards away. We sat and stared at it for a while and listened to McGivern go over his story for the commander's benefit.

" You flew through it ?" he asked, a trifle roughly.

" Yes, sir. I guess I just wanted to convince myself it was really there." He must have realised then what a risk he had been taking and I wondered how he had found the nerve to do it. I certainly wouldn't have liked to have tried, but then I never was one to stick my neck out.



Thompson scowled at the enigma beyond the canopy. If not a cloud or a fog or a mist of some sort, what the devil was it?

"Take her around," he directed. "Slowly. I want to get a good look at this thing. Make a nice, easy circuit."

Stewart started the motors up and eased the floater up to a steady fifteen mph and took her on a long sweep around The Cloud. It still refused to offer any further revelations to our searching eyes. Disgruntled, Thompson ordered a quick run through the outer fringes of it.

It was like sailing through a very fine mist, just thin enough to blur the details of the desert outside. Nothing unpleasant. One thing we did notice was that it didn't seem to hold back the sunlight to any degree. If anything, it seemed actually brighter.

Score two for the mysterious Cloud.

We swam around in it for some time, like curious fish in an unfamiliar pond. Finally, our curiosity unsated, Thompson ordered Stewart to head back to Base. The Cloud had defeated our explorations admirably.

"I'll send somebody out to get some samples of that stuff," he said, sitting back thoughtfully in his seat. "And I want a watch put on it—day and night. If anything's going to happen out there I want us to be in on it. This could be the first time we've ever been able to witness something going on on this damned planet."

We sped out of the Cloud and left it lying quietly on the desert floor and headed basewards at maximum acceleration.

There was no sense in keeping up the secrecy clamp now that we had verified McGivern's find. Within a few minutes of our return I knew that word of our discovery would be all over Base and I wanted to tell Eric personally; I felt he would appreciate that.

He was in his workroom when I went to find him, sitting down at his rock-strewn bench and toying with a piece of ochre-coloured slate brought in from the Wall. His lean, eager young face was drawn into hard, tired lines by fatigue. His ice-blue eyes were dull and lacking their customary alertness as they stared at the priceless remnant of a dead civilisation. The slump of his shoulders told more than words could tell the sum weight of his defeat.



I thumped him lightly on the shoulder. "How's tricks?"

He looked up. "Oh, hello Frank. What brings you over? Anxious to view the latest discovery of the archaeological team?" Cynicism twisted his words into a wry parody of pleasure. "Take a look at this, will you."

He handed me the piece of rock and I turned it over carefully in my hands. It looked for all the world just like any other lump of rock. It could have been anything.

He must have caught this expression in my eyes. "I couldn't agree more," he grunted, good naturedly. "You see those chicken scratches down in the left hand corner there? Well, believe it or not they just might be writing of some sort."

He thumped his hand down on the dusty bench top. "Chicken scratches. Nothing but chicken scratches." His jaw worked angrily and he stared at the collection of rocks and pieces of slate lining the bench. "How's a man to make any sense out of all this stuff? At least back home you've got something to work on, comparisons with other cultures and all that. But *this* . . ." He waved a hand to encompass the sum of his work and swung around to face me. "I don't know, Frank. Sometimes I feel like chucking the whole thing in. I begin to wonder if it's really worth it."

I shrugged. "I suppose we all feel like that now and again, even me. Have you any idea how bloody monotonous, how pointless those mosaics seem to me? God, sometimes I'd give anything to be . . . to be out digging like mad along that Wall of yours."

"You can have it, anytime. This whole business of chasing the past never did seem to make any sense to me, you know that? Every time I pick up a hunk of rock on Earth or the moon or here for that matter, I get so god-damned mad that all that is great and grand in the past has vanished forever, never to be seen again."

He placed the piece of ochre slate with the other neatly numbered and identified relics of the past. "It all finishes up as dust, anyway."

He looked up. "Was there something you wanted to see me about?"

I sat down on a stool. "As a matter of fact, there was. We've stumbled on to something queer out on the Plains . . ."



He listened to my story with barely disguised cynicism. Long experience had taught him to be dubious of other people's ideas. "It sounds like a mirage to me," was his immediate comment.

"It can't be. We flew through the stuff and it was quite tangible."

"Mirages are like that."

"Maybe so—but can you imagine a mirage developing in *this* imitation of an atmosphere?"

"No, but I can imagine one developing in impressionable minds."

"Me, Eric?"

He grinned and looked a little taken aback. The tension seemed to have drained a little from within him. His face was struggling back towards that boyish dreamer I had come to know so well.

"It's tangible enough for Thompson to want to put a guard on it," I pointed out.

"Is he afraid of it running away or something?"

"Not exactly. But McGivern seems to think it's growing."

His eyes narrowed thoughtfully, indicating a developing interest in what I was describing.

"We're going out again to take some samples of the air inside the thing," I said. "I thought you might like to come along . . ."

He regarded me carefully, his face slowly assuming a serious puzzled look. "It does sound interesting, at that. I guess I may as well come along with you."

That afternoon Thompson had one of the big floaters broken out of storage and fitted out with an oxygen recirculating unit. It certainly looked as though he was preparing for an indefinite siege of the thing on the Plains and didn't want us to be hampered by the uncomfortable survival suits.

After McGivern had crammed a formidable amount of photographic equipment on board we headed off towards the Plains again. This time we had two extra on board, Eric and Jim Andrews. Jim had come along to collect some samples of the atmosphere within the cloud to see if he could find out what the stuff consisted of.

We were accompanied by a half dozen of the smaller jeeps loaded up with base personnel coming along to have a look at the thing they had already heard so much about.



This time, McGivern took over the business of piloting us to the Cloud. Stewart sat alongside him in case he wanted to get to work with his cameras during the flight. We settled down in our seats and waited for the machine to bring us down alongside our enigmatic Cloud.

The trip seemed to take an eternity. The floater was a great, lumbering beast that pushed along at a maximum speed of a little over ninety mph. The jeeps had to throttle well back to keep from outpacing us.

With the exception of a few brief exchanges between Thompson and McGivern the journey stretched into a prolonged silence. I suppose we were all busy chewing away at our own particular theories. Only Tom seemed truly thrilled at the prospect before us. The rest of us seemed to be wearing a cloak of brooding expectancy.

Finally, the upper fringe of the Cloud appeared on the horizon. Eric was instantly upright and staring at the thing with narrowed, curious eyes. I was again impressed by the peculiar regularity of the thing, quite unlike any terrestrial cloud or mist. I mentioned this to Eric but he just grunted non-committally and stared steadily ahead.

When the thing had swept up to a reasonably close distance, Thompson ordered the floater down. We settled heavily in the sand about a quarter of a mile from the Cloud. While we struggled into our suits the jeeps from Base settled slowly around us like a swarm of bees.

Once outside, we stood and watched McGivern and Andrews stride purposefully off in the direction of the Cloud to collect atmospheric samples. The men from the jeeps grouped around us and filled the frigid air with their wisecracks. Wisecracks that concealed an infinite amount of awe and superstition.

The Cloud stretched away from us on both sides like a great, white wall. Its exterior surface was a silky, smooth texture completely without signs of turbulence. Sharp eyes could detect slight discolourings here and there across its broad surface. Others insisted that the thing seemed to glimmer slightly.

The two men wandered about inside the fringes of the Cloud for a few moments like little fish in an aquarium. The stuff seemed to be denser than it had in the morning, or was that just my imagination playing tricks?



After about five minutes they walked back out of the Cloud and joined us at the floater. Andrews reported no apparent sensations upon entering or leaving the thing. Visibility was reduced to a certain extent and, on the whole, it had seemed brighter inside the Cloud than standing on the Plains. That tallied with our earlier impressions.

"I still think it's growing," McGivern said. His face was flushed and excited behind the helmet. "It seems to be thicker than this morning, too."

They had scoured the surface inside the Cloud to see if there were any fissures or cracks in the desert floor, on the off chance that the Cloud was formed by vapours rising from beneath the planet's crust. The idea didn't meet with much acceptance. It still wouldn't explain the motionless posture of the Cloud itself. But still, anything was worth trying. There had to be an answer somewhere.

If there was some peculiar sort of gas rising up through a crack in the surface of the planet then it would take quite a while to locate it. At a rough guess the Cloud now covered an area of twelve square miles. Thompson ordered two of the jeeps to take a swift run through the thing and see if they could see anything deeper within it. They were to keep in constant radio contact all the time.

The result was negative. The Cloud was cloud all the way through and the surface of the desert beneath was as smooth as a billiard table.

Andrews was whisked back to Base aboard one of the jeeps to run his tests on the samples he had taken. McGivern took off and began to circle up and around and above the Cloud busily taking movies in black and white, colour and infra-red. After he had completed this he flipped over to a small knoll that was probably the remains of a mountain a good five miles away and set up two time-lapse cine cameras to record any change in the growth of the Cloud. He was still convinced that the thing was expanding at a measurable rate.

Eric drove a tripod into the sand where the Cloud began and walked back to the floater and joined us while we waited for word over the radio for the result of Andrew's test.

When the verdict finally crackled over the speaker inside the Floater we were staggered. The analysis showed that the air inside the Cloud was definitely not Mars normal. Nor was it a mysterious gas wafting up from the depths of the



planet. It consisted of all the normal trace gases present in the thin Martian atmosphere, except that there was an increase of 12% over the accepted norm. That on its own was enough to puzzle us further. But it didn't account for the appearance of the Cloud. Its analysis had not been sufficiently dense to behave the way it did. It was still a long way off from Earth normal.

What was responsible for the enigma?

"I'd better get back to Base," Thompson announced, wearily. "We'll have to try and get through to Earth and tell them about this. Which of you guys want to stay and watch over this thing?"

McGivern arrived back just in time to volunteer as first watch. Eric and I agreed to stay with him until the next day when another bunch could take over. I didn't say it then but I thought they'd have fat chance trying to pull us away from here for at least forty-eight hours.

Sunset heralded the beginning of the longest night we had ever known. The Cloud refused to succumb to the descending canopy of darkness. It continued to glow with the brilliance of daylight, all alone on the frigid, below-zero plain.

It wasn't as if it shone like an incandescent bulb, but more like it just refused to accept the coming of night and continued in the same way as it had all day.

McGivern radioed Base immediately we became certain that the thing was going to stay like that. Thompson's voice barked purposefully back at us.

"I want you fellows to be careful out there. God knows what this thing is—but I don't want you taking any risks, is that clear?"

Quite clear, we assented. He growled at us for a few moments longer and then went back to a sleepless bed. If his intention had been to steady our nerves then he succeeded—for a while.

I turned away from the radio and there was Eric staring out at the Cloud with a strange, puzzled look in his eyes. It wasn't the same look I had seen in Tom's eyes, or the Commander's. This was a different expression, almost as though he was seeing further than our own nervous minds could see. Perhaps into the very soul of the Cloud itself.

There was a gentle whirr as McGivern started up his cameras to record this latest manifestation of the Cloud.



"Tom," Eric said, snapping out of his reverie, "what exposure are you using?"

"F.16 at 32 f.p.s."

"That's the same exposure you've been using all day, isn't it?"

"As a matter of fact it is." The boy's voice trailed off into a curious murmur as he realised what Eric was driving at.

The Cloud hadn't changed in any way. Or had it . . . ?

Eric looked at me, a ghost of a smile tugging gently at the corners of his mouth. "Well Frank, it looks like we've finally come up against it, doesn't it?"

I nodded, sitting down beside him on the bench seat and staring out at the Cloud. "What do you think it is?"

"God knows." The glow from the thing outside washed over us. It was like watching a slice out of daytime in the middle of the night.

"It's alien," he said, softly, the light of triumph glinting in his cold blue eyes. "Really alien. The first time we've ever found something beyond our comprehension."

"We'll figure it out," I said, hopefully.

"Will we?" He rose and strode over to the canopy and stared out at the thing. "I wonder?"

He stood there, unmoving and unconscious of the other two of us in the floater, and stared out at the face of the Unknown.

Sometime during the night I must have dozed off. I was awakened abruptly by McGivern shaking my shoulder and calling out something to the effect that Eric was gone.

I was instantly awake. I jumped to my feet and dashed over to the controls and stared out through the canopy. I was just in time to see his suited figure, complete with a heavy self-contained oxygen unit on his back, disappearing into the searing brilliance of the Cloud. For a moment he was silhouetted against the glaring white light, and then he was gone, swallowed up by the thing.

He had gone off without a suit radio, otherwise I could have roared hell out of him to return. Swearing heavily, I raised Base and told Thompson what had happened.

"The stupid bloody fool!" he exploded. "Who let him do that?"

Rather sheepishly, I explained that Tom and myself had fallen asleep. After spending a few seconds tearing us to pieces he relapsed into relative ease again.



"What does he think he's trying to prove?" he snapped, irritably. I didn't try to explain; I doubted if he could understand a complex character like Eric Kemp. I found it difficult myself, and I had known him far longer than our commanding officer.

"Don't either of you attempt to follow him. That's an order. I'll be out there first thing in the morning. Call me immediately if anything further develops."

He switched off and left us staring silently at the radio. I supposed he was having a sleepless night out of all this. Well, weren't we all?

I tried to picture what it must be like out there. Just wandering around in a great white Cloud and not knowing whether it was real or a product of your own subconscious.

It seemed as though Eric had simply taken up the personal challenge offered by the Cloud and had gone out to meet it face to face. But how could he hope to find anything except the ghostly, intangible matter of the thing?

He had always been a dreamer. Not in the lazy, lethargic manner of most dreamers. He built a solid highway towards the hazy substance of his dreams and forged his way doggedly forward towards his goal. His one desire since he had been old enough to wonder had been to unearth some intangible, something unknown, something man had never before encountered in all his narrow existence on his pitiful mud-ball of a world.

Something alien. Something to open the eyes of all mankind for centuries to come.

I first met him at the moonbase, when I shipped out from Earth to take charge of the mapping of the satellite for geological exploitation, some five years ago. In that time we became very close friends, closer than the gulf of years would ordinarily have allowed. I like to think it was because we understood each other's way of thinking so well.

But no alien discoveries yielded to his probing eyes. The moon was a barren corpse of a world. His dreams were forestalled, and instead his eyes turned towards man's next leap into space.

Mars was a corpse of another kind. It chose instead to reveal a few pitiful relics of a civilization dead a million years before we even began thinking of manned spaceflight. This



time, the elusive unknown left a bitter taste in his mouth. This time he had been close . . . but a million years too late.

And now—the Cloud.

For some reason our fear of the thing outside led us to believe that we might never see Eric again, particularly when it began that weird shimmering. I thought my eyes had just become tired from staring too long at its searing brightness, but no, it did appear to be acting queerly.

These were the first real signs of activity within the cloud since we had discovered it.

A while later McGivern spotted Eric's figure emerging from the Cloud and moving slowly towards us. Relief flooded over me. But something nagged at the back of my mind. Something was missing.

The marker. The tripod Eric had driven into the ground that afternoon. It was gone !

I was still worrying over it when he crawled through the lock and stood grinning at us from behind his helmet.

"You certainly look cheerful," he remarked, slowly clambering out of the suit. "What's the matter, were you expecting a ghost or something?" His face was flushed with excitement just as if he had returned from a brisk walk along a windy shore.

"Did you see anything?" McGivern asked, his voice a little too highly pitched.

"Nothing. Not a damn thing." He shrugged off the last of the suit and walked over and sat down in front of the controls. "It's just the same as before only it's daylight out there and night everywhere else.

"Queer. Damned queer." He shook his head in a puzzled way and brooded thoughtfully out the canopy.

"It's not quite the same," I pointed out. "It seems to be shimmering or something."

His eyes narrowed. "You're right. It is up to something."

And then I remembered about the marker. "What about the tripod?"

"The tripod? Oh . . ." And then he realised that it had disappeared from outside, swallowed up by the advancing spectre of the Cloud.



The following morning Thompson returned from Base accompanied by a flurry of jeeps scurrying low across the dunes. We greeted them with bleary eyes and empty stomachs. The commander patiently heard out our story of the queer shimmering in the Cloud and immediately despatched two of the jeeps to locate Eric's marker.

They found the tripod seven hundred yards inside the Cloud. He immediately ordered the entire crew to withdraw for two miles.

While we hurriedly downed a welcome breakfast, Andrews was whisked into the Cloud to collect more samples and then flown back to base by the swiftest hot-rod available.

Eric received a rather luke-warm dressingdown for his escapade of the previous night. I think the increasing worry of the cloud had dulled Thompson's anger somewhat. There were more important things to be concerned with at the moment.

Such as Andrew's latest analysis of the Cloud's atmosphere. Density was up a further 10% from yesterday, bringing the air inside the thing up to plus 22% Mars-normal.

That was almost breathable.

"By the way," Thompson said, sipping coffee quietly in the seclusion of the floater, "you can take a quick flip back to Base, Eric. The boys are excited over something they've found on the wall. I think you'd better go and see what all the fuss is about."

Rather reluctantly, Eric complied. I could see that he didn't really want to leave the Cloud. Decaying pieces of shale and slate couldn't hope to compete with the excitement facing us on the Plains. Still, the job must go on.

"It won't take you long," Thompson said, understandingly. "I'll get one of the boys to fly you straight back. No doubt you're as interested as the rest of us in finding out what's going on here."

"Thank you, sir."

Eric crawled out of the lock and made his way over to one of the jeeps. The commander sat staring thoughtfully at the Cloud.

Curious and curiouiser. It was beginning to change colour. It was losing the startling whiteness that had first impressed us and assuming patches of dirty-grey that seemed to be, imperceptibly, in motion. Yet the cloud itself remained motionless on the floor of the desert. It had extended its boundaries a



good half a mile since we had first discovered it. Thompson's action in pulling the crew back a couple of miles indicated that he expected further advances to be made in a rapidly accelerating process.

The fissure idea now seemed out of the question. No further theories were forthcoming. Like ignorant savages, we just waited for something to happen.

By mid-day the Cloud had advanced a further quarter of a mile and Eric had arrived back from Base. In his hands he carried a set of photographs for the rest of us to see.

The cause of all the hullaballo back at the base was slight compared to the growing drama of the Cloud. Apparently, some of the boys' patient chipping and rubbing had been rewarded by the discovery of a delicate freize twenty feet down below surface level on the unimaginably deep wall.

It wasn't much. Just a few 'chicken scratches' as Eric would have called them, but they did provide the first continuous set of heiroglyphics we had obtained. They appeared to represent stylised depictions of the Martian race, Eric explained, rather pleased with this reward for their painstaking care after six back-breaking months bent double in survival suits and chipping away at the weathered, sand-encrusted face of the Wall.

But it wasn't any Rosetta stone. And there was still a vast, unknown amount of the wall to be cleared and examined. The job would go on for years.

For the time being, the mystery of the Cloud assumed prime importance. After a brief discussion Eric put the prints away and concentrated on the scene on the Plains.

The Cloud was growing rapidly, pushing out its boundaries now at the rate of a hundred yards every two hours. There seemed no end to its growth. And we were still no nearer a solution than before.

Around about four o'clock Andrews was flown over to collect a fresh set of samples. This time his analysis showed a fantastic increase of a further 38%.

In other words, a man could breathe inside the Cloud without the need of an oxygen tank.

And it was warm. Andrews had taken a thermometer with him this time and recorded a temperature of forty-eight fahrenheit. Compared to the twenty below zero we were accustomed to, that was *warm*.



Towards evening, we sat in the floater interminably drinking coffee and batting opinions back and forth. Mostly they fell soggly to the floor, overladen with hypotheses and theories closer to fantasy than anything else. But there had to be some way to explain the thing out there on the Plains.

McGivern was the first to notice the increased signs of activity within the Cloud. His cry drew our attention to the enigma and while he busied himself with his cameras we stared out at this new manifestation.

Within the dirty-grey wall of brightness, something moved. It was impossible to distinguish exactly *what* it was, only to realise that movement was present, and movement on a vastly more accelerated scale than we had been watching for the past eight hours. It seemed that the very stuff of the Cloud was rolling and twisting in upon itself, undulating with a regular rhythm. The edges were no longer clearly defined, either. The perimeter of the Cloud now faded off and lost density in much the same manner that a fog or mist would appear thinner at the edges.

The edges were the section in most violent upheaval. They rolled and curled as though in mortal torment. It was enough to make us go cold over.

"Hell," was all I could think of to say. And backed away a step from the canopy.

Beside me, I heard a click as McGivern switched off his time-lapse camera. There was little point in using it now that the activity in the Cloud had speeded up. He put a call through to the two boys operating the unit on the far dune and asked them to set it back to a normal 32 f.p.s.

Activity increased within the Cloud all through the ghostly night. Great shapes seemed to flash across its stormy surface like phantom images fleeing suspicious retinas.

We watched it until dawn, our eyes weak and tired with fatigue but unable to give up the battle with the need to watch the awesome sight beyond the floater.

Andrews made his last collection of samples around ten o'clock. We all thought him rather mad to attempt it under the circumstances, but he gathered enough courage for a quick flip into the Cloud and out again. This time the report showed an oxygen content slightly higher than Earth normal.

The temperature inside the Cloud was eighty-four degrees, fahrenheit.



By twelve o'clock it had expanded another half mile and showed no signs of letting up. The whole substance of the thing was now violently in motion, criss-crossed by constantly changing patterns of stress.

"When is it going to stop?" Thompson asked, his words dulled by fatigue and apprehension. Reluctantly he ordered no further trips to be made into the Cloud. With the temperature going up so rapidly there was no telling what might happen. The thing had developed beyond our limited ability to explain.

He ordered the withdrawal of the unit three miles further behind the low line of dunes that had served as our look-out. At the same time Eric put in his request to stay behind in the floater and observe the Cloud from within when it rolled over our present position.

"It's the only way we're ever likely to find out what it's all about, sir," he explained.

"I never thought you were that mad, Kemp," Thompson grunted, half in admiration. "But I don't think there's any possible hope of us finding out anything that way. The whole thing could combust and blow us off the face of the planet."

"Andrews doesn't seem to think so. He says the atmospheric content . . .

"To hell with Andrews! The damn thing's alien. How can we expect to pass judgment on it?"

"I'd like to point out, sir," Eric said, quietly, "that no problem has ever been solved by running away from it. I'm willing to take the chance."

But McGivern was already requesting permission to stay behind with Eric. He reckoned he would be able to get some quite spectacular shots at close range when the thing really got moving. Exasperated, Thompson finally gave in.

"All right, then. I'll have the boys bring some food over and you can settle down and see what happens. But I'll give you no longer than twenty-four hours. If you haven't pulled out of that thing by then, then by the living powers I'll come in and drag you out myself!"

He made his way out of the floater muttering something about 'damned heroes' but with a trace of pride in the gentle smile around the corners of his eyes.

During the night the Cloud absorbed the floater. In the morning there was no sign of it on the desert floor. Our last



glimpse of it had been as a silhouette against the unearthly glow that slowly rolled over it. And then it was gone.

The new day brought a strange calm over the Cloud. It existed now as a soft, delicate grey shroud over the land. No more did it appear as a clearly defined, egg-shaped object. It was beginning to look more and more like the way a cloud should look. But we weren't easily fooled.

It seemed to have stopped expanding and lay quiescent on the floor of the Plains. The very air around us seemed charged with expectancy. The stillness lay heavily across the land.

Now the waiting became critical. Since the Cloud had stopped performing we had had little to occupy our strained nerves. One thing we had found out that upset us ; it was impossible to make radio contact with Eric and McGivern in the floater. The cloud seemed to have developed a tremendous talent for static which made it useless trying to communicate. So we just sat down and waited. We should have been used to it by now, but it hadn't been this bad before.

Sometime after lunch the Cloud began to shimmer violently. While we were still debating this new occurrence one of the boys yelled out that he could see something inside the mist. For a while we accused him of imagining things, but later it became obvious that we were seeing things his own sharper vision had detected long before ours.

Gradually, the hazy lines of a mammoth mountain range became visible through the now tenuous vapours of the Cloud.

In the floater, Eric and McGivern watched the patterns around them converge into visible outlines. As they made out the shape of the mountains emerging in the distance they felt their scalps begin to prickle. Cut off as they were from any contact with us beyond the sand dunes, they were left to suppress their own galloping imaginations.

McGivern's cameras whirled constantly, recording the shifting, changing patterns visible beyond the canopy. Only the mountain range was recognizeable amongst the chaos of swirling colours outside. What would come next they had no idea ; the whole concept stretched their imaginations to the limit.

They had realised by now that they were witnesses to a drama of truly cosmic scale. What it would eventually lead to they couldn't even guess, but they were willing to go along with it. Eric had no intention of pulling the floater out of the mess and



fleeing back to join us. He had come too far and lost too many years to let this slip through his fingers. The feeling sent a strange exhilaration flooding through his system.

McGivern watched the scene outside with a rising excitement that dispelled thoughts of danger. This was a once in a lifetime experience and he intended to enjoy it to the full. Thoughts of personal safety never entered his mind.

Of such stuff are heroes born.

From our position of comparative safety we could observe the constantly changing patterns weaving across the Cloud much better than their limited close-up look. The whole thing was shimmering or vibrating so much that it was difficult to look directly at it for too long a time. By now we had all thrown our pet theories overboard and become resigned to the fact that we were all victims of some gigantic optical illusion. That way it was possible to accept what was happening without the risk of going mad.

For staring too long at the pictures forming out of the stuff of the Cloud Eric was rewarded with a thundering headache. McGivern forced a couple of pills upon him and told him to rest up a bit. Reluctantly he did so, only too aware of the necessity of having a clear head for what still lay ahead of them. He sat wearily down after taking the pills and within five minutes had fallen asleep.

He was shaken rudely awake in the early hours of the morning by McGivern's rough pummelling and a voice verging on hysteria.

"Eric, Eric! Am I going mad, am I going *crazy* . . .?"

The boy's fear acted better than a bucket of water. He was instantly on his feet and wide awake and following the direction of McGivern's pointing finger.

The Cloud was gone. In its place a jagged mountain range ran across the horizon, menacing real and solid, the culmination of the ghostly images they had seen earlier the following day. Its outlines were a little obscured by the long columns of dust rising high into the astonishingly blue sky that was unlike any sky Eric had ever seen on Mars. The dust was thrown up by the immense procession of people and machinery that passed around the floater.

Were they both mad, then, to conjure up this spectacle of alien reality? Had the stuff of the Cloud curdled their brains?

"Start the cameras, for God's sake," Eric said, hoarsely.



"They're going," McGivern explained, his teeth chattering a little in the silence of the floater.

Eric walked forward and stared at the fantastic scene outside.

The whole thing was impossible. He kept telling himself that all the time his mind marvelled at what he saw. Utterly impossible. Nevertheless, it was there, for some reason or another, and he didn't believe his imagination could ever conjure up a scene as alien as this.

*Alien.* That was the word.

The people parading by outside were obviously not human. Humanoid, yes, and in a way remarkably similar to human beings. But they were tall and heavily muscled and with the finely cut features of the ancient Greeks. Their eyes had a distinctly Asiatic slant and were much larger than terran eyes.

Martians? Still alive in a dead world a million years after it had fallen to the ravages of time?

It was enough to shatter the credulity of the most stubborn minded men.

"Is it real?" McGivern asked, nervously.

Eric nodded. "Real to us, and that's all that matters."

"What's causing it then?"

"I wish I knew. I do wish I knew . . ."

"They're not . . . human, are they?"

"Do they look it?"

McGivern shook his head. No they didn't *look* human, but you couldn't overlook the astonishing likeness. Particularly when you had automatically prepared yourself for something completely alien to your own way of life.

The few chicken-scratches uncovered on the wall had revealed drawings of beings roughly humanoid. If you took that to mean a highly stylised form of art then you could quite easily recognise the beings outside the floater as genuine Martians. But how . . .?

"I don't believe it," McGivern said.

"You don't have to. Just make sure those cameras keep ticking over and slam some more film into them when they run out."

He reluctantly turned his attention back to the three cameras while Eric studied the people marching steadily past the floater. Their stride was enormous. They must have been something like seven or eight feet tall. Magnificent, towering specimens.



Male, probably, but not for certain. After all, they *were* an alien race, of that there could be little doubt.

Each one was clad in a sort of tunic and harness which left most of their chest bare and supported objects suspiciously resembling armaments across their massive shoulders. Their dark brown skins glistened with perspiration. They marched steadily ahead with their eyes fixed on an unseen objective far in the distance.

Towards the mountains.

"Why don't they see us?" McGivern asked.

"Because they can't, I suppose. Why else?" He turned around and looked back across the sea of faces towards the sand dunes beyond. Only there weren't any. The world seemed to end abruptly where the marching columns disappeared into thin air. There was no sign of the commander or his group.

He felt suddenly cold. The Cloud had ended just about where the marching columns faded away into nothingness.

"Tom," he said, quietly. "Don't panic, but I can't see the commander's men anymore."

McGivern eyes endeavoured to open wider than they already were. He pushed past Eric and walked to the other end of the floater and stared back at the end of the world. When he turned around a strange calm seemed to have settled over him.

"Well," he said, walking slowly back. "Where the hell are we now?"

It was a good question.

From our position atop the dunes we had watched the Cloud finally play itself out and assume the fantastic shape it now took before our disbelieving eyes. Through the night we had watched the pictures begin to form and take definite shape, until the morning greeted us with a sight more incredible than we had ever hoped to witness.

The mountains had emerged clear and angrily distinct in the distance. The substance of the Cloud itself had apparently dissipated to be replaced by the moving patterns that finally resolved into immense columns of men marching steadily towards the distant mountains. They emerged out of nothing at what had been the edge of the Cloud and disappeared into the hazy distance.



We thought of them as men because they marched like men. More precisely, they marched like *soldiers*, and when we put the 'scopes on them we discovered that they also carried their weapons like men. Across their heavily muscled shoulders.

It could only be an army, an army such as no Earthman had ever before seen. The fact that they possessed a striking similarity to human beings only made the whole business more remarkable. There immediately rose in our minds the possibility of mankind having sprung from identical stock as other stellar races. It raised hopes of future contact with beings more like ourselves than the bug-eyed monsters we had imagined.

But could those creatures out there be *Martians*?

And how had the cloud been connected with this?

We were so busy arguing over the whole impossible business that it took us some time to notice the vast, incredible machines crawling slowly across the desert ahead of the marching columns. And far in the distance, almost invisible amidst the shimmering heat haze of a world basking in the warmth of a sun unlike the one resting over our own heads, the delicate spires of a fairy city rose to greet the mountains.

And of the floater there was no sign.

"We're lost," Eric said.

"Lost? Where?"

Eric turned around slowly in his seat and rested his tired, anxious eyes on McGivern's frightened face.

"In time. I guess."

"What do you mean?"

He waved a hand to indicate the scene outside. "They don't exist in our world any more than we do in theirs, so they naturally can't acknowledge our existence. But we can see them. Don't ask me why we can, it's not my business to interpret Reality and what binds it together."

As he spoke he let his eyes wander over the scene outside with a certain satisfaction. He had come at last face to face with his adversary. He had breathed the essence of the Unknown. He had tasted its draught and felt no fear. He had found his Nirvana at last.

"The Cloud," he said, "must have been some sort of temporal displacement. It's almost certainly happened in our own probability track, on Earth, many times over the centuries. God knows there's enough unexplained phenomena in our past



*and* our present. But nothing was ever on such a grand scale as this. But how . . ."

His mind wandered through a wilderness of chaotic metaphysics in search of an answer to the enigma.

"Something like an echo," he went on. "An echo of some cosmic event across the corridors of time to our own *now*. That's why it built up gradually to form this solid existence. It couldn't happen all at once. Temporal reverberation had to take place somewhere along the line. And, like all echoes, it will ultimately fade . . ."

He jumped quickly to his feet. "Have you any still cameras?"

McGivern eyed him curiously. "There's a Leica . . ."

"Give it to me. And some film. As much as you've got. There mightn't be very much time left."

While the boy loaded the camera he struggled quickly into a suit, wondering whether or not he'd have enough time to do what he wanted to do.

He grabbed the camera from McGivern's hands and stuffed a couple of cassettes of film into a zippered outer pocket. He discarded the helmet hurriedly and clambered out through the air-lock. The air outside was considerably denser than Earth's anyway. He didn't wish to be encumbered by the helmet when using the camera.

He landed heavily on the Martian soil and took a breath of the alien air. It was intoxicatingly fresh, quite unlike the canned stuff they were used to breathing. And no wonder—it was the atmosphere of Mars a million years ago.

He turned his attention to the grim lines of marching figures streaming inexorably past the floater. His camera was instantly in action, recording the people from an unimaginably great distance in the past. It was the opportunity of a hundred lifetimes. No, a million.

McGivern watched his movements anxiously. He hadn't attempted to argue with him. He knew determination when he saw it. All he could do was watch and hope for the best. He tried unsuccessfully to raise the commander and then drifted back to the canopy and stared helplessly out.

Eric moved rapidly along the sea of faces, his camera capturing the extremes of expression amongst the marching men. He saw grief and fear, triumph and disaster, anger and determination, hatred and remorse, all mirrored in the



enormous eyes of the aliens. His camera captured evidence for all time that man alone did not have the monopoly on emotion.

And what were they heading for, these poor, god-like creatures? What destiny awaited the end of their weary journey?

And then he saw the city, rising beneath the towering ramparts of the mountains. A delicate tracery of tall buildings bound together by a gently shimmering light. The air around him seemed to whisper and sing like a melodious breeze.

Why then, the fear in their eyes?

It was impossible to disbelieve that this race and his had not at one time in the remote past, sprang from identical stock. The resemblances were remarkable. What a document they were making with their cameras, his and McGivern's, for the eyes of Man to see and wonder at!

The columns were rumbling to a disturbed halt. He drew himself away from his task and stared up ahead to try and discover the reason for the unrest amongst the marching ranks. The whole tremendous mass seemed to be undulating uncertainly creating a sound which rose like a mighty roar to flood fearfully across the desert. Stark terror leapt into the eyes of those around him.

A great light seemed to blossom over the mountains and sweep out towards them. The whisper around him rose to a terrifying screech as the air was compressed and mutilated by the approach of the dreadful wave of light.

He had no time to think. The great light engulfed them all and he was left standing amidst a great golden curtain of pulsating brightness. The very fabric of space seemed to scream in mortal torment and he felt his mind being ripped to shreds.

He screamed. The sound was caught and twisted obscenely by the forces whipping wildly around him. He toppled and fell into a howling pit of sonic madness and wallowed helplessly in the shambles of reality around him.

He couldn't see a damned thing. Already the world around him was dissolving and running together like a melting motion picture. Faces and people swirled and coalesced into a dull grey murk just as they had appeared, when the Cloud lay still born on the face of the desert.

Dumbly, he realised that he had found his reason for the echoes existence. Not a chance weakness in the fabric of time,



but a rent torn by an unimaginable creation of war that had literally shattered the substance of time and tore this fragment away and hurled it helplessly down the millenia. This it had accomplished within the immediate vicinity of its operation. The rest of it had probably spelt doom for the entire planet and had left this dry husk, stripped of its atmosphere and wallowing uselessly in an orbit around a sorrowful sun for all eternity, or until the genius of man once more brought it to life.

He was finding it difficult to breathe. But of course . . . the echo was fading, much quicker than it had appeared. The atmosphere was returning to Mars normal. And that meant . . .

He cursed the stupidity that had made him leave the helmet and oxygen cylinders back in the floater. If he hadn't been in such a damned hurry . . .

He lay gasping for breath as his dream broke up around him. His last conscious thought was to hang on to the camera at all costs. That was before he fell into the deep well of unconsciousness and waited angrily for death to claim him.

Somehow, McGivern found the courage to overcome his fear. Otherwise, Eric might have died on the desert, gasping away his life like a fish struggling on the shores of a lake.

He slammed on a survival suit and crawled through the air lock and bounded out across the few hundred yards to where Eric's figure sprawled on the dry sands. He half carried, half dragged the body back towards the floater with hysterical speed, feeling all the time that it might already be too late.

He dragged him aboard the floater and dropped him on to the floor. He pumped him like mad for almost half an hour before he gave a great shudder and opened his eyes and stared out at the world again.

He was still pretty groggy when we squeezed in through the airlock and assembled around the interior of the floater, waiting for him to explain what had happened to him out in the middle of all that madness. In the meantime, McGivern obliged by spilling out his own story to our eager ears.

Our voices must have helped to bring Eric out of his fog. He sat up on the floor and looked around. "My camera," he said, hoarsely. "Where's my camera?"

Tom handed him the Leica. "It's okay. You didn't stand much chance of losing it. It took me half an hour to get it out of your hand."



Eric nodded, thankfully. He pushed himself up and stumbled over towards the controls, his eyes staring out at the empty desert beyond. The Plain lay silent and endless beneath the wan light of the afternoon sun. The winds of time had erased the last vestiges of his dream.

His shoulders drooped. He gripped the back of one of the seats and closed his eyes. For a few moments his jaw worked angrily and then he turned around, walked over and sat down on one of the bench seats. He bent his head and stared down at the floor, oblivious to those around him. He looked for all the world like someone who has lost his most precious possession.

And what is more precious than a dream ?

The Cloud was gone. There was nothing more to be done. We returned to Base.

And now it's all over. We don't sit around as much as we used to, letting McGivern run through the films over and over again for us, but we still think a lot—and wonder.

There's nothing more to do except await the arrival of the ship from Earth and listen to them accept our story with all the scepticism of the unbelievers. But wait until they see the movies, *and* Eric's stills. That'll show them.

Eric's more impatient than the rest of us. It will be at least another nine months after the ship returns to Earth before he can expect that excavating equipment to arrive. He can't wait to start digging where he thinks that city used to lie out there on the Plains.

We've sent a number of pleading letters back home begging for the equipment but they've ignored every one. Can't say as I blame them ; they must think the whole Mars base has gone psycho.

I wonder how many psychiatrists will be on board the ship when it comes ?

*Lee Harding*



## Guest Editorial (Continued)

to deliver. So, whether the critics like it or not, S-F is entitled to carry a message, can hardly avoid doing so.

But now, you may think, I have backed myself into a corner. If social values are inherent in any fiction, and S-F is nothing if not given to taking 'new' looks at things, then surely Amis is right—and how do I get out of it? Quite simply. The escape is performed by the aid of a double-sided semantic mirror. On one side is the legend 'What do you mean by 'social satire'? and on the other, 'What do you mean by S-F'? It's a question of definitions. In this case, although you may doubt it, both are easy to grasp. Like all good tricks, it's easy once you know how. Let's take and define 'social satire' first.

This is the fiction-form in which the writer holds up the contemporary scene to the distorting lens of his talent, and, with a little exaggeration, reveals the insanities and stupidities, the follies of his generation. 'This,' he says, in effect, 'is our horrible society, stripped of its silly shams and pretences—take a good look!' I have nothing against this, may I say at once. I believe satire serves a useful purpose, that these writers are saying things which need to be said and that they follow a long and honourable tradition, from Sophocles and Petronius to Dickens and Waugh, and all the variations in between—all the way down the mainstream. That's the point I want to make.

This is mainstream writing. Any reasonably competent writer, with an eye and a conscience, can find well-nigh unlimited material, right at his doorstep, for this kind of fiction. In fact, the writer who feels he must set his scene far out in space, on a distant planet, or in the far distant future, in order to take a running kick at current society, is revealing weakness, not strength. Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* will serve as a perfect example. Amis classes this as science-fiction, by his definition, on the basis that Swift went to a lot of trouble to build detailed backgrounds, in a series of 'never-never' lands. But time has made the final test. *Gulliver* is no longer read as satire, nor as S-F, but is considered, today, as more suitable for children.

What I am saying, quite simply, is that social satire, as such, is not S-F. In that, alone, I count Amis as being completely wrong. Whatever S-F is, it most certainly is not mainstream



writing. Before I get to the vexed question of what S-F *is*, let me remind you of something John W. Campbell once wrote, in an editorial. The dynamic behind all S-F writing, he claimed, was the idea 'There must be a better way of doing this.' Now, if we apply this to social satire, where the mainstream writer is content to reveal current evils and illnesses as they are, and leave it at that, the S-F urge is to go further, to say 'Look, this is the way things are—and this is *how*, and *why*—and what is going to happen next, at this rate . . . what's more, this is what I think we ought to *do* about it.' Not always, of course, and not as explicitly as that, but that is the intention underlying genuine S-F writing.

So, what is S-F, anyway? Gallons of ink have been soaked into acres of paper on this, and all from the point of view of what S-F is 'about.' And the desperately simple fact is that S-F is not 'about' anything. Or, more accurately, it is about anything and everything that can be appraised in a scientific—a logical—manner. That is, it ought to be, but it isn't, and I'd like to come back to that, later. For the moment, let's consider Fred Pohl's comment, in an editorial (Again? Where would we be without those editorials?). 'Crime-fiction' he said, 'is fiction about crime; Western fiction is fiction about the West; but science-fiction is *not* fiction about science.' Now, hold on to that a moment, while we consider the 'idea' of science itself, as a way of organising the facts and findings of observation such that we can say, with workable confidence 'If this—and that—then so-and-so must follow.' It is a tool, a way of relating causes and effects such that, given certain premises, we can predict, within known limits, what will inevitably happen.

If we now add 'science' to 'fiction' we have the makings of a definition, in function. Add ingredients to taste, as many and as varied as you wish, but once you have established the framework, made the basic assumptions, set the scene, the plot must then work itself out to the conclusion dictated by those assumptions. No cheating. Let the author, just once step in to manipulate his logic to make the story 'come out right' and it is no longer science-fiction, but fantasy. It is this which makes S-F different, and much nearer to reality than any fiction form since the days of 'inevitable' Greek drama. For, if we look at crime fiction, we see that the crook is always caught; in Western fiction the bad-man always



loses, never mind that he is tougher, faster on the draw, or has the bigger gang. Morality must be preserved, somehow. But this, however much we may deplore it, is not the way the world runs, in fact. Crime quite often pays handsome benefits, and villains escape scot-free with depressing regularity. And, I suggest, current fictional satire is just as unreal as any other form.

This is why S-F is 'backward' in that field. Its insistence on strictly logical extrapolation puts it out of court. Like this. The mainstream satirist is tolerated, even admired, so long as he confines himself to showing how sadly the world backslides from its declared values; so long, in fact, as he maintains that the values are good, and it is we who are not keeping up to them. This is like a nagging conscience, not nice, but understandable. The science-fictioneer, on the other hand, is naturally inclined to be a bit suspicious of 'fixed' values, is apt to suggest that maybe they're wrong, that it's time we tried fitting the society to the man, and not vice-versa. And, immediately, he is on forbidden ground. Out come all the old clichés about science being incompetent to deal with 'values,' or to have anything valid to say about 'right and wrong.' We are told to stick to gadgets and gimmicks, stay out in Space—lay off the 'sacred cows of society.

This is why I said, back there, that S-F should be free to deal with any and everything that can be assessed in a logical manner—should be, and isn't, not at the moment. This, too, is one of the reasons why, in my opinion, S-F has been in the doldrums—because of the quite understandable reluctance of editors to publish, and the public to read, logical considerations of matters deemed to be beyond the provinces of science or logic. But, from where I'm sitting, it looks as if the barriers are due to come down, any minute. As I've said, elsewhere, S-F doesn't create basic ideas, it extrapolates from them, once they have been accepted. And there are signs that the whole fabric of traditional 'social' values is shredding under the strain of new growth, which means that the ideas which have been taken for granted for so long, and which form the foundations for our social thinking are due for a hammering, are getting it, in fact.

Take, for instance, the belief that 'democracy' is a 'good' way of life, which carries, of course, the antithesis that any



other way is 'bad'; put that alongside the yardstick of 'results'—and the answer is a nightmare. The 'bad' Communists are running away ahead in technology and in economics, while the 'good' democracies, who invented these things, are dragging their feet in distress. The 'good' of democracy and freedom and self-determination are currently wreaking havoc in Africa. Britain's economic wizards are running us into greater debt than even the 'wicked' socialists did—but this is the 'affluent society' we are told. Technology, the wonder-child of the age, brings us a filthy snarl-up in transport, wholesale massacre on the roads, and one economic crisis after another. The miracle of television is about to bring you and me the lowest bearable standards of intelligence and good taste—but in glorious colour, yet! Atmospheric pollution . . . explosive population . . . the decline and collapse of ethical standards . . . the hopelessly ineffectual struggle of organised religion to stop the rot . . . the threat to sexual mores attendant on the coming of the oral contraceptive—all these problems, and many more are threatening our social structure with ruin and bafflement. The standard, the accepted 'right' ways, sanctioned by history and endorsed by leaders elected in the traditional manner, are being seen to fail, and fail again, helplessly.

Currently, it is still possible, barely, to put the blame on 'science.' But that isn't going to stand up much longer, as an excuse. Soon—any time now—the obvious answer is going to percolate through and reach the status of an accepted 'idea,' an accepted 'possible.' It should run something like this: Science is what it is because, above all else, it works—it achieves workable results. For that, the evidence is overwhelming. So, never mind the morals, the ethics, the traditional values, the historical abstractions, for the moment. Let's get this 'science' to bear on putting the whole sorry mess into some sort of workable order, once more.

Once let that idea breakthrough into acceptance on an everyday level, and we're off. I know S-F has handled this kind of theme many a time, in the past, but it has always been from the angle that the results would be bad—different from the current standards, thus 'wrong.' Anti-utopias we have had, by the dozen, but extrapolation from the 'approved' idea that science can bring a new, saner, and better world—that is just different enough to constitute a major change, and an exciting challenge. It can't come too soon for me.

*John Rackham*





### British—Hardcover

Having waited four long years for a new Arthur C. Clarke novel, appetite whetted by such publicity as condensed publication in the *Evening Standard* and *The Reader's Digest*, I reached avidly for *A Fall of Moon Dust* (Gollancz, 16/-) then sat immobile until the last page had been satisfyingly absorbed. It's that kind of book. By simply taking the "Thetis" submarine disaster as his basic theme and extrapolating to the Moon—with the ship a tourist vessel which sinks to the bottom of a 'sea' of lunar dust—Mr. Clarke has come up with a cracking science fiction novel, thoroughly 'British' in approach and treatment, beautifully and authentically descriptive, uncannily plausible and well-characterised. His lively literate style justifies him a position in the front ranks of contemporary novelists, and as suspenseful, adventurous, verisimilitudinous science fiction it is immaculate. Its 'cliff-hanger' construction, too, is very successful as the scene changes rapidly from the plight of the people in the submerged dust-cruiser to the efforts of the lunar authority and its technicians to effect a rescue. Strongly recommended, possibly the SF Book of the Year.

Clarke's book rather jumped its place chronologically in the predominantly gaudy yellow dustjackets of the current review shelf, for Gollancz' first SF choice (for August) is a welcome revival (first publication in England) of Hal Clement's *Needle* (13/6d.), a brilliantly written story of Hunter and Quarry, extraterrestrial, symbiotic creatures which crash on Earth and assume human hosts. The Hunter merges with a young boy, and the weird sleuthing collaboration begins—a 'needle-in-a-haystack' search—continuing with relentless pace and impeccable reasoning of symbiote processes, to a blazing finale when the hunted is ferretted out from its surprising hiding place and destroyed. Already a classic in the genre, this edition should win many new converts to science fiction.



For the companion volume Poul Anderson's **Guardians of Time** (Gollancz, 13/6d), collates the four novelettes of the Time Patrol (published in *Magazine of S-F and Fantasy* between 1955-60) and provided that you do not worry over-much about the 'mutable-time' paradoxes which abound, these swashbuckling yarns of temporal adventures, replete with interesting ethnological information and leavened with sly humour are eminently enjoyable reading.

SF Choice for September is **Spectrum** (Gollancz, 18/-) an anthology selected by Kingsley Amis and Robert Conquest. The contents, 10 stories culled from American magazine sources spanning two decades (avowedly discarding the more widely distributed material, which excludes all the well-known British authors) fascinatingly reflect the personal tastes, temperaments, and professional reputations of the two editors. I think they have succeeded, (with two personal reservations) in presenting a varied and entertaining collection of quality and solid content, uncluttered by morbidity and shock effects. Katherine Maclean's "Unhuman Sacrifice," and Stephen Barr's "The Homing Instinct of Joe Vargo," both dealing with alien culture contacts, I thought suffered by comparison with such fine stories as H. Chandler Elliott's "Inanimate Objection," which interestingly and wittily develops the theme of malevolent aggression by inanimate objects; and "The Executioner," by Algis Budrys, the hilarious "Null-P," by William Tenn, "Pilgrimage to Earth," by Robert Sheckley—all descriptive of those possible future trends the s-f writer does so well. John Berryman's "Special Flight," is a racily technical space-ship adventure typical of *Astounding* in 1939, while Clifford Simak contributes a sharply cautionary (in the sense of proportion) "Limiting Factor." The two heavy-weights are perfect big-name contributions—Frederik Pohl's most entertaining and acutely observed satirical shorter story "The Midas Plague," and Robert Heinlein's early, longish, intricate time-paradox "By His Bootstraps."

Dr. Leo Szilard is a renowned nuclear and biophysicist (a useful combination these days!) and his **The Voice of the Dolphins** (Gollancz, 15/-) promises so much in the way of literate s-f, but the good ideas and satirical observations on our present and future political troubles are strangled by tedious writing, like a dull scientific report (which is no doubt the professor's metier). The book opens aptly with Stephen Vincent Benet's strong poem of nuclear conflict "Nightmare



for Future Warfare," followed by Dr. Szilard's six short stories, the longest being the title story about a Vienna Institute solving world problems to the point of total disarmament with the aid of educated dolphins—a nicely calculated spoof. "The Mark Gable Foundation," is a variation of the "Sleeper Awakes," theme, and "Calling All Stars," presents the emergence of mankind as a threat to a group of cosmic brains. Other snippets will also be familiar to the s-f enthusiast, but there is a neat vignette on childhood values called "Kathy and the Bear"—not s-f—when the author achieves a sudden flash of creative writing. Alas, it is the end of the book.

What a contrast to meet again Henry Ward whose undercover adventures at the highest levels of political and scientific intrigue are directly responsible for the Earth's salvation from dire extraterrestrial forces, and are further immodestly chronicled in *The Green Suns* (Sidgwick and Jackson, 15/-). In staccato torrents of words, personalities and events, mostly confusing, but sometimes compulsively readable, Ward tells of the temporary nullifying effect upon the world's nuclear stockpiles caused by the transition of our own and a 'parallel' universe. The pseudo-scientific gobbledegook and mock authenticity of international events gets a little overpowering at times, and one's ability to suspend disbelief in order to enjoy this arrant if imaginative nonsense becomes a trifle difficult to maintain.

Comfortably, but not complacently because of continuously fresh and provoking ideas, Clifford Simak brings us back to real story-telling in *Aliens For Neighbours* (Faber, 15/-)—anglicised title of the American *Worlds of Clifford Simak* (sadly I deplore the implication of this change). Simak has been a prolific stalwart in the s-f field for three decades, every story of top-quality readability turned out with almost casual skill. He is the Will Rogers of science fiction—homespun philosophy, cosy charm, keen wit, and an affinity to nature, et al. He specialises in gadgets and likeable extraterrestrials, and has a feeling for the problems of ordinary man confronted with apparent miracles, and a diabolical penchant for the ironic ending. Here is a wonderful collection of nine stories, all but two set on Earth and mostly of quietly provincial scenes, wonderfully characterised, wherein strange things happen, such as inter-dimensional gift swapping, multi-dimensional housing projects, a symbiote hosted by a village idiot, a friendly 'skunk,' animated plants, or unusual neighbours. Yet he is equally at



home on distant planets dealing with strange cultures, and proves hard to match for sheer versatility, inventiveness and entertainment. Thoroughly recommended.

Lovers of the supernatural will revel in *The Edge of Things* by William E. Barrett (Heinemann, 18/-) which contains two novels and a short story of fantasy, having aviation as the common theme. "We are such stuff as dreams are made on," and often in the awesomeness of flight life slips past reality to the 'edge of things'—a thought borne out by these highly fanciful, often touching, but always readable stories.

Finally, a single addition to the Fitzroy edition of Jules Verne edited by I. O. Evans, *For the Flag* (Arco Publications, 12/6d). This is a rare Verne title dealing with a powerful secret weapon, a self-propelled missile, comparable to modern atomic bombs, subject, needless to say, to the machinations of pirates and its half-crazed inventor. Good stuff.

Leslie Flood

#### British—Paperback

Although the output of paperbacks from British publishers has been stepped up (temporarily at least) few review copies come our way, a peculiar trait common throughout British publishing, so with equal abandon I can leave out the parsimonious publishers. Fortunately, Corgi Books are producing a high literary standard for the home market and the pick of their recent titles is undoubtedly Jim McIntosh's *One in Three Hundred*, which I am also prepared to go on record as rating his best.

Written originally as three novelettes and published in *F & SF* before that magazine had a British distribution, then in book form by Doubleday (US) and Museum Press (GB) it recounts the superhuman task of choosing one person in every three hundred to be taken to Mars for survival when a slight shift in the stability of the Sun is going to overheat the Earth. Both human interest and interplanetary travel are outstanding in this grim tale of the survival of the human race for even on Mars their troubles are not over.

Corgi have followed this McIntosh title with another, *World Out of Mind*, which is nowhere near so good in plot but still written with the verve and intensity which characterised Mr. McIntosh's earlier novels.

Also from Corgi, *Third From The Sun*, a very fine collection of short stories by Richard Matheson whose recent novel *I Am Legend* I enthused about, and Charles Eric Maine's s-f thriller



mystery **Count-Down** which saw first publication in *New Worlds* back in 1959 and needs no further introduction.

Probably the most exciting novel published recently by Corgi is John Lymington's **Night Of The Big Heat** which many English readers will remember seeing on TV (and which was a talking point in the press for 48-hours). Unless my guess is wrong "John Lymington," is the pseudonym for quite a well-known s-f writer—and, let's face it, he writes a far better novel under the pseudonym. Full of suspense, the novel commences on a high note—increasing temperature until the characters in the small Norfolk community are virtually at each other's throats, but the heat is only a prelude to a localised alien invasion, details of which it would be unfair to expose, and when human and alien eventually meet the drama reaches unexpected heights.

Kingsley Amis, reviewing in the *Sunday Observer*, writes, "John Carnell's anthology **No Place Like Earth** (Panther) is outstanding all British Authors (Clarke, Wyndham, Christopher, McIntosh) all but a couple first-rate." This new paperback edition will no doubt please those readers who originally missed it and have been asking for it ever since.

### **American—Paperback**

It is not the policy of this column to review every American paperback published although the American publishers are far more co-operative with review copies than the British. The main policy here is to pick the best titles for mention and occasionally flay the bad ones. Somewhere along the line titles will be ignored because they offer little or nothing to the genre in general.

Top of the list this month is Daniel F. Galouye's **Dark Universe** from Bantam, without doubt one of the best novels of the year so far—yet one which is difficult to review because of the danger of revealing any of the plot developments the author has so brilliantly contrived. Even the blurb writer for Bantam had great difficulty in thinking up cover expletives without remotely hinting at what the story involved, but he managed it, just. Let me say that it is a modern "lost race" type in an unwordly setting, in which the author takes the reader along step by step as the central characters fumble their way towards the light of civilisation—a world where senses other than our own have been developed and where contact with humanity must, of necessity, be a terrible shock. Mr. Galouye has



produced a fine new type of novel, rich in human emotion and drama, delicately and delightfully written. One could wish more of this calibre were produced *every* year.

BB stands for a Batch from Ballantine this month and a very good batch it is, too. Top title, for my money, is not a novel but a collection: **Tales of Love and Horror**, edited by Don Congdon, with no less than three gems from the irresistible *Playboy*—"No Such Thing As A Vampire," a very clever modern vampire story; "The Sign Of Scorpio," by Charles Mergendahl, and that gem of gems, Ray Bradbury's "The Illustrated Woman," which gets better each time I read it. Add several excellent and unusual modern horror stories by Robert Graves ("The Shout,"), Evelyn Waugh ("Tactical Exercise,"), Jack Finney's "The Love Letter," a poignant love story through Time, the shuddery "The Horsehair Trunk," by Davis Grubb, a John Collier "Not Far Away," plus stories by Helen R. Hull, Roderick MacLeish, May Sinclair and William Sansom and the whole becomes a most unusual and entertaining collection of off-beat stories with an extremely high literary standard.

Another interesting off-trail collection of macabre stories from BB is **The Clock Strikes 12** by H. R. Wakefield and I'm guessing that this is a shorter version of the original 1949 Arkham House edition. Nevertheless, if you haven't seen this one and you like a good weird run for your money, try it.

Topping the novels from Ballantine is Ward Moore's **Greener Than You Think** which made such an impact when first published in 1947. This is the story of the grass taking over the world and a minor classic of its time. Buy it for your collection if you haven't already got it. Another Sarban novel, **Ringstones**, is also in the list this month, much more enjoyable and better written than his two former novels, but it takes a lot of patience to make one appreciate this type of slow-moving fantasy novel. One "Sarban" in every five years would be sufficient for my taste.

Best non-fiction title for many years is Arthur C. Clarke's **The Challenge of the Spaceship** a collected series of most of his recent articles in such magazines as *F&SF*, *Coronet*, *Holiday*, *Harper's* and others. Written for the general public in Arthur's concise and slightly tongue-in-cheek style it is a symposium of what has been happening and what may happen in the near future in the field of space research. Definitely another one for the bookshelf.



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Two good titles from Pyramid Books this month. *The Synthetic Man* by Theodore Sturgeon is that old favourite *The Dreaming Jewels* (published in the UK by Nova back in 1956) and still my favourite Sturgeon novel, probably because of its unique carnival background. Sentient crystals from another world which mould peculiar human beings—the only place where their oddnesses pass unnoticed is in the fair ground. Naturally, there is an unscrupulous “carny” boss who exploits their talents to the utmost. A delightful book.

6 x H is the abbreviation for Six Stories by Heinlein from Pyramid, alone worth the 35¢ for “The Unpleasant Profession of Jonathan Hoag,” (which originally appeared in *Unknown Worlds* under the pseudonym of “John Riverside”) and “And He Built A Crooked House.” For good measure you also get “They,” “All You Zombies,” “Our Fair City,” and “The Man Who Travelled In Elephants,” which add up to quite an off-trail collection of stories that have not been anthologised too often.

John Carnell

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